Speak Low

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Speak Low

by auxctor

Summary

"Neil feels something in his chest light up. Like a firecracker or an atom bomb or something else that could self-destruct at any moment. It aches in a dangerous sort of way.
'God', Neil thinks to himself as he follows Todd into the house to help him with boxes. Why had he thought being roommates with Todd was a good idea in the first place? He's going to suffocate on these feelings; they're getting too wedged in his windpipe.
'God, you lovesick bastard, you're so, so stupid.' "

Or, alternatively; a modern day university AU in which Neil lets daddy issues prevent him from telling Todd how he feels, Charlie doesn't know how to knock, Meeks and Pitts are the only characters with brain cells, and the Neil Perry Support Group is born.

Go Big or Go Home

Chapter Summary

in which Neil makes a decision

Chapter Notes

hey there!
i really hope you all enjoy this fic. it's my first fanfic i've written in years and i'm really excited about it. it's about four times longer than i intended, but here we are.
i'll post chapter two sometime next week. in addition, there is one chapter in the future that may require a tw, and i'll make sure i mention that in the chapter notes.
thank you guys so much. enjoy <3
xx,
auxctor
p.s i know pitts is the only poet not mentioned in the first few chapters I SWEAR I DIDN'T FORGET HIM

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The truth of the situation is this; there is no easy way to tell someone you love them.

Neil knows this. He's always been better at putting his heart on the line than most people but he also knows how much fear can live in someone's chest before taking the leap. The unknown of telling someone that they are— in fact— your deepest vulnerability is terrifying.

Which is why Neil hasn't admitted that he's in love with Todd Anderson.

At least to Todd, anyways. Neil wants to tell him; he really does.

The problem is that love is a painful thing for Neil, always has been, and he's not sure exactly what being in love with Todd means. Because when Neil was a kid, love was just a cover-up. A lie like Santa Claus or the Easter bunny; something to help an eleven-year-old Neil, who had just been ripped apart by his father, sleep at night.

Todd Anderson is Neil's first and only love.

But Todd's different than everything Neil used to know. Todd is—

Gentle.

This is why Neil has officially decided, despite the pain that love seems to be coupled with, he's going to tell Todd he loves him in the next few months. By Christmas; that's his deadline.

Dead poet's honor.

Actually, Todd is pretty much the only person who doesn't know that Neil's in love with him. Meeks and Charlie know, by no fault of Neil's. Cameron was never told, as he's terrible at keeping secrets, but he certainly suspects by now.

And Charlie hasn't dropped it since he found out.

Speaking of which, presently, Charlie is over a half an hour late. The scratched face of Neil's watch reads 1:38.

Neil knows he could just go up to the door and knock, as he's been sitting in his driveway since 12:50, but a phone call from his father sent him into forty minutes of self-doubt, so he's just been in the car having an invisible sort of panic. He doesn't want to go in as the Dalton's know his father, and he doesn't feel like talking about his dad right now. He's already stuck in the battle of not wanting to call his father and knowing that he should.

Neil just needs to get himself to stop thinking; his dad can wait.

He is going to enjoy this day, he swore by it. It's the day everyone will finally be coming to live in the dorms, starting their freshman year. He double-checks his phone; nothing new.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Neil, 1:32

Neil taps his foot against the break of his car, even though his car is off; more of an impatient tick than anything.

They are in no actual hurry, but Neil is really ready to help Charlie get settled in his dorm room so that they can see everyone, and finally, finally, Neil would be able to hang out in a dorm that isn't empty. An almost completely empty floor, actually. Summer there was better than summer at his house, but it was strange to spend summer with so much silence.

There's a knock on Neil's window and he starts from his train of thought. He looks up quickly, and there is Charlie with his cocky half-smile half-smirk. His arms are full with a mini-refrigerator so he's knocking repeatedly with his elbow; he doesn't stop knocking even once Neil sees him.

Neil rolls down the window.

"Are you gonna help, dumbass?" Charlie asks. He's already got his usual aggressive confidence ready for the first day. Or, moving day.

"The trunk's unlocked. And nice to see you too."

Charlie ignores his comment. "Good, this is fucking heavy."

Neil gets out to open the trunk for Charlie. "I'm assuming you've got more than this?"

"Yes, of course. It's gonna take a few more trips."

Neil offers despite his hesitancy about seeing Charlie's parents. "Need help?"

"Sure. And don't worry; my parents aren't home."

Neil can't help but let his lips quirk up at the comment; he didn't think that would even cross Charlie's mind. "Your parents aren't going to say goodbye?"

Charlie just shrugs; he's never cared much for being fussed over and Neil knows this. "They said goodbye this morning, I told them they didn't have to see me off, they went to work."

Charlie moves on the conversation; he has no interest in talking about his own family. As they start back towards the house, Charlie walks a few paces ahead of Neil before he seems to realize that he's doing it. He falls back to walk, or more swagger, next to Neil.

Neil hates that word, swagger, but it's the only accurate way to describe the way Charlie walks. Charlie Dalton is the only person who makes even overdramatic, larger than life Neil Perry look like he lacks confidence.

"How has summer in the dorms been?" Charlie asks as though he can tell he's losing Neil to his rushing thoughts. Charlie kicks a pine cone with the toe of his shoe as they make their way up the walkway.

"Honestly, great. Got ahead in credits, didn't have to live with Dad," Neil says, "It was a win, win really."

Charlie pushes his slightly ajar front door the rest of the way open and Neil follows him into his shiny, perfect entryway with a beautiful spiral staircase and perfect tile floors. The Daltons are the kind of rich you find in housing magazines; granite countertops and fancy light fixtures that don't quite qualify as chandeliers but are pretty damn close. In their spacious entryway, an almost-lobby if you will, there's a pile of random shit in the middle, most of which is stuffed haphazardly into trash bags. It really ruins the whole wow factor of the Dalton household.

Neil pauses before speaking. "Did you actually pack the majority of your dorm shit for college in garbage bags?"

"Yes?" Charlie regards the mountain of trash bags in front of him with a proud yet confused expression, as though he can't understand how Neil could critique his flawless packing job. "Why?"

"I— just normally people pack their belongings in, y' know, *boxes*."

"I didn't have a lot of time!"

"When did you start packing?" Neil asks. Charlie had plenty of time, he always does, just he doesn't use the minutes the universe gives him. That's the kind of person he is; everything is an expectation for him. When Neil is given something precious like time, he basks in it.

Charlie takes out his phone to check the time. "About 12:30, I believe."

“Is that why you’re thirty minutes late? Charlie—” Neil says, but he’s laughing.

“Nuwanda,” Charlie corrects.

“Jesus Christ, you’re still on that? “ Neil rolls his eyes even though these are the things that make Charlie— well, Charlie. “Well, Nuwanda, normally people start packing at least a few days before they have to leave. I started packing at least a month before I moved.”

“Well, then I’m not ‘most people’, am I Neil?” Charlie says, going to pick up a bag of his belongings.

Christ, Neil missed The Poets this summer. Neil says as much after they finally finish getting Charlie’s belongings in the trunk and backseat of Neil’s shitty Subaru.

“Jesus, I missed you all this summer.”

Neil knows exactly what Charlie’s going to say before he even opens his mouth.

“But I have a feeling that there was one of The Poets in particular that you missed most—” Charlie lets his words hang thick in the air as he ducks into the passenger seat, probably so he can watch Neil turn red and try to chew on his words. But Neil’s not embarrassed; there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. His feelings for Todd are like his love for acting—they’re just built-in.

Neil knows this. Just as he knew this would come up at some point, sooner rather than later.

“Be quiet,” Neil laughs, hitting Charlie on the arm in the reprimanding, companionable way that they’ve been doing since they were kids before putting his hand on the back of the passenger seat headrest so he can look out the rear window as he backs out of the Dalton’s driveway.

“Have you talked to the aforementioned boy toy much this summer?”

“Okay, I don’t care if you make fun of me but please never use the phrase *boy toy* ever again. Especially when talking about Todd.”

Charlie smirks. “Didn’t answer the question, Perry.”

“Yes, we video called quite a bit but, for the millionth time, we are

just friends,"

"And soon to be roommates." Charlie wiggles his eyebrows at Neil and Neil wants to die (in the metaphorical way, not the real, sharp way). "And potential loverssssss."

"I mean yeah. That's one way to put it," Neil says, knowing that his feelings for Todd Anderson (in fact his soon to be roommate but also his best friend) are undeniable. Damn it, Charlie.

"I thought you were going to cry if he wanted to room with someone else."

"I was not going to cry."

Charlie leans back the passenger seat so he can prop his feet up on the dashboard."Drama queen. Come on; he's been friends with us for a year now and you've been hopelessly head over heels for him for the past eight months."

Neil gives in, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. "It's been like ten months now, for the record."

Yes, Neil had fallen quite quickly. Charlie whoops loudly in a celebratory manner.

"I'm actually thinking about telling him."

"That you love him?" Charlie says, looking slightly surprised but extremely pleased with himself, as though he's the one who decided that Neil and Todd should be together and now his hard work is finally paying off.

"Yes. I'm going to tell him that I'm in love with him and— see what he says."

"Can't you can just like—" Charlie pauses. "Ask him to get dinner? Or to fuck? Do you really have to start with the startling confession of love?"

"Go big or go home, Dalton."

Neil's not sure, but he thinks he hears Charlie mutter "fucking theatre kids."

"And, just for the record; asking him to fuck is not casual. I don't even know if he's gay."

Charlie just snorts. “We’re all gay, Neil.”

“That’s not true; Cameron’s straight. And we don’t know about Todd.” Neil sees his point, though. He, Charlie, and Meeks are all queer to some degree, and all-out (especially Charlie, who will flirt with anything that moves and makes that fact known), and so they don’t often have friends who aren’t. They don’t mean for it to happen; it just does.

“If you just asked him, you would know. Carpe Deim, Neil.”

“Don’t go all Keating on my ass,” Neil says, glancing over at Charlie as they stop at a red light. “Plus, how would that conversation even go? Hello roommate, I know you've been living with me for a whole fifteen seconds, random question though; on a scale from Cameron to noodle, how straight are you? Also, I have had feelings for you for nearly a year that are so present that you’re low key ruining my entire life. Okay, cool, finish unpacking your shoes now.”

Charlie nods in approval. “Yeah. That sounds good.”

“Shut up,” Neil laughs. “I’m not telling him right after we get back. I need time to plan.”

“Hey, you know if you want real dating advice, I’m not the man to go to.”

“There’s literally no one else to go to!”

God, Neil hates Charlie sometimes.

But *Jesus Christ* is it good to see him again.

Neil brings the last bag up to Charlie’s room for him because apparently, he’s too tired to do it himself. By the time Neil makes it up the two flights of stairs, someone is sitting on the opposite bed in Charlie’s room, talking briefly about the courses he’s planning on taking.

“Welcome back!” Charlie says when Neil comes back into the room. “Neil, this is my roommate Keith. Keith, Neil.”

“It’s Knox,” the roommate corrects, turning to Neil. “My name’s Knox.”

“Oh close enough,” Charlie says. Smirk. If they were all living in a comic book, Charlie would have a little action bubble floating around him that just said “smirk” 24/7.

Knox already looks like Charlie is making him tired. It’s not that Charlie is too much of a talker really, it’s just that his personality is so big that it fills up small spaces like this.

“Nice to meet you,” Neil says, shaking Knox’s hand.

“So,” Charlie says, raising his eyebrows at Knox and leaning forward as though his roommate is the most interesting person in the world (but not before sending a wink in Neil’s direction), “what were you saying about your classes?”

Neil checks his watch. He’s been gone for no longer than ten minutes, so Knox couldn’t have been here for more than that and Charlie is already flirting with him. That had to be some sort of bisexual record.

Though with Charlie, this was to be expected.

Neil sits on the windowsill as he listens to the conversation, as Knox tells them about potential classes. Neil tells them both a bit about summer in the dorms and Charlie recites some new poetry.

Knox contributes some thoughts on the poems.

“Excellent,” Charlie says, “You like poetry? We’ll get along just fine.”

“Yeah, I actually started reading more of that kind of literature because my girlfriend’s really into that stuff,” Knox says.

Charlie looks disappointed.

“So, where did the name Nuwanda come from?” Knox asks, looking at Neil as though he already knows that Neil is a more reliable source of information.

“Oh, well— that started late last year. Early junior year we started this —”

Neil gets cut off by a phone ringing. It’s his own.

Again.

His heart drops into his stomach and there's suddenly a feeling in his lungs as though they're being crushed with a heavy weight. He reluctantly checks who's calling.

It's not his Dad. Neil picks up immediately.

"Hey, Neil?" Todd's gentle voice says from the other end of the line and makes Neil soften immediately. *God, I'm such an idiot.*

"Hey Todd," Neil makes his way out of the dorm so Charlie and Knox can unpack in peace. Charlie gives Neil a quick pointed look before the door shuts behind him. "What's up? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," Todd's voice is shaking in the way it doesn't often do when it's just Neil he's talking to. "I— are you busy?"

"Uh— not really. I just finished helping Charlie move his stuff up."

"Sorry to— sorry to bother you, but— I know this is a lot to ask—" Todd is getting tangled in his own words the way he often does. Neil knows how Todd's anxiety weaves such a suffocating web for him, so well spun that every suffix of Todd's gets caught in it.

"Todd, it's okay. Take a breath. What do you need?"

"My parents; they said they were going to drop me off today since I don't have a car yet. And— and uh, it must've slipped their mind. They had a thing this weekend and Jeffery's already gone back to school and I—I don't have a way to make it to campus."

Neil asks the question so Todd doesn't have to. "Do you want me to come to pick you up?"

Todd's voice gets quieter. "Could you?"

"Yeah, sure. It's no problem."

"I'm s—I'm sorry, Neil. And I've got all my dorm stuff— sorry. Thanks. God—"

"Todd, it's alright. It's seriously not a big deal. I'll be there in about fifteen, I'm guessing? I'll text you when I'm there."

Neil hangs up before Todd can try and apologize again, then starts down the stairs.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Todd needs someone to pick him up

Be back soon-ish

have funn w that ;)

I hate u

Todd's house is a bit away, seeing as it's in the town over, just like Charlie's. It is closer than Charlie's, though. Neil drums his fingers against the steering wheel while his shitty radio blasts show tunes from a used (and slightly scratched) CD.

He thinks about what Charlie said. He could just do it. Nothing is actually, physically stopping him from just telling Todd today. But; Todd's already nervous enough for college and Neil can't in good conscience add to his anxiety level.

Anyways; he needs a plan. And the right time will present itself.

There is a certain fear that comes with it all; one that's not related to the fear of being rejected. It's this fear of dating someone he cares about this much; because for Neil, love is often associated with pain.

When Neil was younger, his father would yell at him until he was shaking. He and his father never had a relationship that was anything akin to easy— they'd always been fire and gasoline— but the outbursts started to get truly terrible around the time Neil turned thirteen. Whenever Neil made a minor mistake or tried to say anything that was important to him, his father would laugh at him in a 'my son is so pathetic' way or yell at him until Neil was dry-heaving from the stress of it. As he got older, his father would pick him apart, piece by piece, for anything and everything he did. For everything he loved. For everything he was.

According to his mother, Neil's father "loved him very much". Neil remembers those days, laying in his bed and staring at the ceiling, wondering if he was loved this way because he deserved it. Self-hate was a dirty, all-consuming animal.

If that's love, Neil used to think as himself as his father shouted threats and slurs or grabbed him by the wrist as he talked in that stern way that made fear run through Neil like an electric shock, *I don't think I want it.*

He knows things outside of his family are different.

They have to be, right?

Neil pulls into Todd's driveway.

Toddy Boy

Here!!!

Despite having texted him, Neil gets out of his car to knock on Todd's front door. Todd will probably need help carrying things and Neil knows if he doesn't offer, Todd won't ask.

Neil rings the doorbell. His fingers drum against his leg as he waits and soon enough, the door is pulled open.

And there is Todd, standing in the doorway.

The summer hasn't been kind to Todd. Neil knows this; he's been talking to Todd almost daily and Todd has told him about the hostility and the ways Jeffery always comes before Todd and how Todd's mother puts him down for being nothing like his brother. Neil knows that Todd has been feeling nothing but anxiety for the last three months. But it's different to see Todd in person; his hands are shaking worse than when the school year ended and he looks so fucking tired. But he had insisted on spending this last summer at his parents' house; Neil knows it's because this was the last summer Jeffery was going to

be home in Vermont before he moved. Todd kept saying it was bitter but still fine, but the tense, stressed look of him says otherwise.

Despite that, it's still Todd. Neil's Todd. With the soft eyes and the nervous expression. A little bit of blond hair is falling in his face and Neil resists the urge to push it out. Honestly, Neil spends a lot of his time with Todd just *resisting*.

Neil is speechless; nerves—worse than he's ever had before any show or speech or presentation— bite at his brain. The thoughts, the reasons why not, flood his brain. Right, this is what's stopping him.

Todd says something but Neil doesn't quite make it out.

"What?"

"Thank you so much," Todd says softly.

Neil feels something in his chest light up. Like a firecracker or an atom bomb or something that could self-destruct at any moment. It aches in a dangerous sort of way.

"Anytime."

God, Neil thinks to himself as he follows Todd into the house to help him with boxes. Why had he thought being roommates with Todd was a good idea in the first place? He's going to suffocate on these feelings; they're getting too wedged in his windpipe. *God, you lovesick bastard, you're so, so stupid.*

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for reading! pls remember to leave kudos & comments <3

Polaroids

Chapter Summary

In which the poets plan their first meeting and Neil keeps up a very stupid lie

Chapter Notes

neil perry is a pisces send tweet.
also thank you to all who left kudos or commented on chapter one. it means so much to me <3
enjoy,
auxctor

The first poets' meeting doesn't start getting arranged until they are two weeks into classes. It takes a little too much energy if Neil's honest; their schedules conflict so much now. Especially Meeks; as proud as Neil is of him and the fact that he's attending Harvard (he's the only one of them to attend an ivy league), the three-hour drive to get Meeks there greatly limits possibilities.

Meeks says they can do some without him, but both Charlie and Neil immediately say no.

The only unfortunate thing about that is that Neil has to wait until the weekend for their first meeting which means the week *drags* by.

But, there are still good things.

"Neil, don't you have a lecture today?"

Neil groans and rolls over so that he's facing the wall. "Unfortunately. Fucking biology."

He hears Todd laugh lightly. "What's so bad about bio?"

This causes Neil to immediately turn back the other way so he can see Todd from his bed. Todd is sitting on the floor with a textbook in his lap and a small smile.

"Everything, Todd. Absolutely everything."

“At least it’s not chemistry.”

“I became a theatre major for a reason; I can’t stand these kinds of classes,” Neil complains.

“Well-- you’ll have to take less and less core classes,” Todd says, and he frowns slightly. “Are you okay-- like are you, uh-- are you just tired or--”

“I’m alright,” Neil reassures him, knowing what he’s getting at. Todd has seen him on his most brutal depressed days and now worries over every sign; after last year, Neil can’t blame him. “Just hate bio.”

The soft smile returns to Todd’s face and Neil wilts. It’s illegal to be that fucking pretty. It’s got to be.

“Okay. Okay, good,” Todd says. He checks the alarm clock. “What time does your lecture start?”

“Twelve.”

“Well, then you have over an hour,” Todd says. Neil knows what he’s not asking and it makes him smile.

“Want to get food with me?” Neil asks for him.

Todd nods. “I had my seven am today so I didn’t get a chance to eat yet.”

“Dumbass,” Neil throws a pillow at him. “You need food.”

“I know.”

“Who the hell takes a seven am class by choice, anyway?”

Todd shrugs. “Nobody. That’s the point; there are much smaller lectures.”

Neil’s biology lecture is excruciating. The professor is going on about something Neil doesn’t care about or understand; he pulls his phone out of his pocket and holds it under his desk as he opens his messages.

Hey

Todd

Im bored

I hate biology

sucks to be you.

Rude

Ur so much meaner over text

i'm just trying to take a nap.

sorry

Tell me thongs

SHIT NO

*****things**

Don't apologize

But pls save me from this eternal hell

lol

neil it's just bio.

I need ur support todd

PLS

Tell me thingsssssss

fine. uhhhh...

i had my lit class today; the seven am. that was

good overall. i want to go to the library later.

you can come if you'd like to.

you don't have to though

Nice

Yeah, when do u want to go?

i don't know, probably 6ish

i also wrote a poem yesterday? so that's a thing.

OH FUCK YEAH
POETRY

Can I actually read it this time???

maybe after some editing.

COME ON TODD

PLS
YOU HAVEN'T LET ME READ

ONE IN AGES

go listen to your bio lecture.

education, neil.

…

…

…the mitochondria is the powerhouse

of the cell

See I'm learning

neil.

as much as i feel for you and your struggle,

i'm tired. so i'm going to take my nap now.

good luck. don't die.

And thus, I die

Thus

Thus

Thus

That evening, Neil can finally let himself feel excited; they're only two days away from the meeting. He's always loved poets meetings but over the summer they were nearly nonexistent; he is hungry for company and the bending of beautiful language. He and his boys. Him and his poets.

"Wait— Nuwanda; did you invite Cameron?"

"Huh?" Charlie looks up from his phone, answering through a full mouth of food. They're sitting in one of the dining halls, getting an early dinner before Charlie has his five-thirty class.

"To the meeting on Saturday. Cameron. Did you invite him?" Neil asks.

"Uh--no?"

"Why not?"

"Must've forgotten," Charlie says, looking back to his phone, but with the half-smile half-smirk on his face. Neil looks at Todd where he sits next to him, but Todd just shrugs.

"Fine; I'll do it," Neil says, pulling out his phone.

"Does he have to come?" Charlie asks, part question, mostly whine.

"Yes, we all know you hate Cameron because he threatens your way of life—"

"What exactly is my *way of life* ?"

"Being queer and obnoxious," Neil says, not looking up from his phone.

Charlie seems to consider for a moment, taking a thoughtful bite from his sandwich. "You're not wrong."

"Okay, cool well; I'm inviting him. If he's a buzzkill we'll make him

leave," Neil says. It's an argument they've had ever since Cameron joined their friend group; Cameron wanted to room with Charlie this semester, but Charlie "accidentally" forgot to turn in their rooming request form on time.

"He's just so *uptight* ."

"He's gotten better," Neil defends.

"Better doesn't mean *good* ."

Neil just rolls his eyes at Charlie. Yes, Cameron could be an ass, but Neil has always thought Charlie is a bit hard on him. "Well I say he's coming so he's coming."

In Cameron's defense, Charlie can be an ass too. Just a different kind of dickishness.

"Why do you get to decide? Is this not a democracy? Todd should get a vote; you're the tiebreaker." Charlie says, leaning across the table to steal a fry off of Todd's plate.

Todd shakes his head. "'m not getting in the middle of this."

"Well— I bought you lunch yesterday. And I say he's coming," Neil says.

"You suck," Charlie sighs, and he goes back to eating.

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

Cameron

Cammmmmeron

Don't make me crack out the full name

Don't make me do it

Fine

U leave me no choice

RICHARD!!!

I don't know your middle name
CAMERON!!!

Pls respond

You know you can just send one

text, right?

I get a response much quicker this way

We're having a poets meeting on saturday

U in?

I thought we were done with that.

Are we continuing it in college?

…

Clearly

So, r u in?

Richard!!!

I need to study.

"He's being difficult," Neil says.

"Tell him he's lame," Charlie responds.

"I thought you didn't want him to come?"

"Now that I think about it, who am I supposed to bully if he's not there?"

Come on

Nuwanda says your lame

Neil Perry Sent An Audio Message

***you're**

Did you actually just send me a voice

message of Charlie calling me lame?

Yes! Now r u in?

Nuwanda told me to tell you that he

is no longer responding to the name Charlie btw

Just send me a time and a place.

"He's in." Neil's just about to set his phone down when it starts to ring. He goes to pick it up. "Damn it, what does Cameron—"

It's not Cameron.

"Oh—" Neil says quietly, "It's my Dad."

Neil's heart stops. If he keeps this *ignoring my father* thing up much longer, his Dad's going to get pissy. Pisser than he is naturally.

Neil looks up to see both Charlie and Todd staring at him. Todd looks as sick and anxious as Neil feels and although Charlie is still smirking, his eyes have gone all worried.

"I'll be back," Neil says, getting up so that he can talk to his father outside. His blood is cold; his feelings about his father are haunted and fearful things.

"Hello?"

"Neil," his father says from the other end of the line after a short pause. "I do hope becoming an adult hasn't taken away your manners."

It takes a moment for Neil to understand. "Oh-oh. Sorry. Hello *sir* ."

“Now don’t stutter. It makes you sound unintelligent.”

Neil and his father had been talking for a whole ten seconds, and in the great game of “how many things can I do wrong in front of my dad, Neil has a batting average of 0. He wants to say something about the nervousness that his father mistakes for a stutter because he feels particularly defensive over that certain insult. But he glosses over it.

“Right sir. My apologies,” he says as sincerely as he can muster. He’s proud of himself for not going back to his and Todd’s room, grabbing a pencil, and gouging his own eye out.

“How are your classes?” His dad is doing the thing with his voice, the faux sincerity. The fake caring he always dips his questions in to get what he wants.

“Good, Sir. Very good. I had biology earlier today; they say it’s— it’s good to take the intro before pursuing the actual class and taking other— medical classes.”

“Good. Good,” his dad responds. “And Harvard’s treating you well?”

Neil feels his stomach twist. “Oh— yeah. Very well.”

God, lying was a bad idea.

“You need to make sure you’re keeping up with your work.”

“Yes Sir.” Neil’s waiting for the catch. His father always has an agenda; Neil holds his breath.

“And Neil?”

There’s this heavy moment of awkward silence.

“Yes sir?”

“I know you requested for your mother to send a box of your things,” Neil’s father says and Neil can feel a knot tighten in his chest.

Neil’s afraid to ask; his father wasn’t supposed to know about that. “Yes?”

“That box was full of nonsense you don’t need; your mother and I aren’t going to waste the money shipping it.”

Neil feels his stomach drop. Of course, they went through Neil’s

things. God, that's why he wanted the box out of the house in the first place; he knew his father would look through it. And they were things Neil wanted; he thought his mother might send the box before his Dad had the chance to know about it.

Neil asks the question, voice cracking, but he knows he's not going to like the answer. "Could I come pick it up when I visit you next?"

"We threw it out."

Neil feels like he can't breathe. "You— what? You threw my things out?"

"Neil! Don't talk back to me."

"I wasn't—" Neil catches himself and surrenders. "Sorry, Sir."

"Yes, we threw it out. It was a waste of space and a waste of money to ship. Don't question me."

Neil's voice is barely more than a breath. "Yes Sir."

Neil went through everything in his brain that the box had held. Photos and memorabilia from all the adventures The Poets had been on, every kind note from Keating about his work, the program that Neil had gotten from the community theatre play, and— Neil takes a sharp breath— the rainbow flag he had gotten from pride with Charlie the summer before senior year.

He had kept it at Charlie's all that time but had gotten it back a few days before he moved out so he wouldn't, well— forget it.

Neil's dad knew he was gay. But he pretended he didn't; Thomas Perry still was convinced Neil was going to be a Harvard educated doctor with a nice wife and a few kids in a house surrounded by a white picket fence.

"It's— all gone?"

Neil's father lets out an impatient sigh. "Neil, don't be so dramatic."

God, Neil feels so stupid to have forgotten that box. His father is right about him; he can't fucking do anything right. "I— sorry Sir."

"It's for your own good, Neil. Forget about all your highschool— *mistakes* and do well at Harvard. Got it?"

“Yes Sir.”

Everything important is a mistake, according to Mr. Perry. The play, the coming out, the poets. Every missed assignment, every wrong word he’s said. Neil’s suicide attempt.

Neil sometimes wonders if that’s on the long list of mistakes because Neil failed at making his family look perfect—

Or if it’s on there because it was only an attempt.

“I’ll let you go so you can get back to your work now. Make us proud.”

“Yes Sir.”

Neil’s father doesn’t say goodbye before hanging up. Neil just stands there, silent phone to his ear, and hates himself for a minute. He doesn’t feel like eating anymore.

After the phone call with his dad, something about seeing Charlie and Todd right now feels daunting. Neil feels embarrassed to see them, as though Mr. Perry’s hate will be etched into his face and they will think Neil hates them too. Or maybe just because according to his father, Neil himself is an embarrassment. Something worth hating.

Honestly, it’s not a surprise that his father threw away the memories he had with the poets. His father has always hated Charlie for being— well, Charlie, and had come to loathe him when he came out as bisexual. Neil’s father has never said why he hates Todd, but Neil knows subtlety about feelings has *never* been his strong suit. Cameron and Meeks had no penalty really, at least nothing Neil’s father knew about; Mr. Perry just hated them because they were part of the group. A group that inspired Neil to act. A group that supported Neil’s sexuality. A group of boys who were forgiving instead of firm. Soft instead of severe.

And then there’s the whole Harvard thing— yeah, maybe Neil had fibbed a little about which college he’s attending. But it’s fine. He’s an adult and there’s not a damn reason his Dad needs to know that he’s attending the smaller local college as opposed to moving the four hours to go to a school he hates. Sure, he would have had Meeks, but Neil has never fucking wanted to go to Harvard. He doesn’t want to feel squashed by school anymore.

Neil heads back to his and Todd’s room. He doesn’t turn on the light;

he just tosses himself on his bed and tries not to get teary— his dad is right, isn't he? Neil is just too dramatic. He has a class that was canceled this evening, and for once in his life, Neil isn't grateful for it. Without classes, he'll just be doomed to think himself to death.

And so Neil does. He's not sure if he lays there for minutes or hours or years just thinking.

His father always manages to make his heart heavy. Why can his father still puppet Neil from hundreds of miles away? He thought his father moving for that new job would fix things, that states between them would change this all, but it didn't. It hasn't.

A quiet knock on the door sends Neil shooting up into a sitting position, quickly wiping any reminisce of pathetic tears from his face. He doesn't need to ask who it is; nobody else knocks that quietly.

Todd opens the door just enough so he can see Neil. "Can I come in?"

"Of course. You don't have to ask; this is your room too."

Todd doesn't respond to that; he just eases the door closed behind him. He reaches a shaky hand to turn on the light but seems to decide against it as Neil notices a white Styrofoam box with the dining hall logo on it in Todd's other hand.

"Uh—hi. You didn't come back and, I— well you didn't finish your food so—" Todd shakes the box weakly and gives Neil a worried look. Neil gives as much of a smile as he can; Todd comes over to Neil's bed but waits until Neil nods his permission to sit down.

Neil loves him so damn much. Shame and self-loathing are heavy things but Todd is the light in the dark cave that is Neil's mind; Todd will never fix the things that make Neil's world bitter, but he makes them lighter. He makes it so Neil doesn't have to suffer in silence.

Todd is everything Neil isn't and Neil loves him more than words can say.

"Todd?" Neil asks as Todd offers him the box and re-situates himself to be more comfortable on Neil's bed. Neil takes the box.

He wants to tell Todd. Neil wants to take Todd's hand and kiss his forehead and hold him until he stops fucking shaking like that. Neil wants to be something that makes Todd steady. He wants to make Todd solid in the same way Todd makes him feel free.

“Huh?” Todd asks, chewing on his thumb nail as he does.

Neil remembers his 18th birthday when he and Todd had driven all the way to see a musical in Boston together. Neil’s birthday fell during spring break, and Charlie and Cameron were on vacation with their respective families and Meeks was doing some week-long SAT cram course. (Meeks had already taken the SAT two times but he was determined to get a perfect in the English section even though he’d already scored a perfect on the math portion every time.) They had planned to celebrate once everyone was back.

So it had just been the two of them and Jeffrey had given Todd his old Polaroid camera, and they’d taken at least two dozen polaroids at the musical, at dinner afterward, and in Neil’s car where they just sat and talked for a while. They’d ended up spending two days in Boston. Neil had known he was probably going to get shouted at by his father because he was supposed to be home at nine but he figured if he was going to break a rule, he was going to milk it for all it was worth.

And he remembers that too; the yelling afterward. He remembers the things his father had said; especially when his father found out that his son was alone with a boy. His father refused to raise a queer; he said it was something Neil just needed to get over. That night, after a good two hours of hell with his father, Neil just sat at his desk, his entire being deteriorating. He had that thought, the one that still visited him on the worst days.

The gun in his father’s office. Neil could try again.

But he didn’t; he’d promised the poets he’d stay alive. He’d *promised*. And so, when he couldn’t sleep, he looked through the polaroids. Todd laughing because of a joke Neil had told, Todd looking at Neil with faux annoyance over something Neil had said, Todd blushing over a comment Neil had made.

But the polaroids were in that stupid fucking box. So they were probably in the trash with his community play program and his poetry and his pride flag.

And with that, Neil loses heart and changes his mind. He can’t tell Todd. He can’t. Once Todd is his, Todd will also be something he can lose. So Neil says the next best thing.

“Thank you for bringing the food. You’re my favorite person, you know that?”

Todd smiles his toothy, unguarded grin and then looks away because his face has gone pink. Todd is so quiet that Neil almost doesn't hear him.

"You're my favorite too Neil."

Neil, right then, almost gets the courage back but then Todd asks if he wants to study with him at the library, and the moment is gone.

That evening has a certain weight to it. Todd makes it bearable but Neil can't stop thoughts of his father leaking into the night, making it bitter. Neil hopes that Todd doesn't think it has anything to do with him.

Neil has just finished his biology essay when his phone buzzes.

That Dipshit Nuwanda *has created a chat with* ***Smartass Ginger™*** *and* ***Neil Perry***

That Dipshit Nuwanda *has changed the group chat name to* ***The Tea on Todd***

Neil Perry

Wait did you literally make a gc

so we can talk about Todd?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

yeS!

you said you're going to tell

him and u haven't

HENCE THE GROUPCHAT

Neil Perry

IT'S ONLY BEEN LIKE THREE

WEEKS CUT ME SOME SLACK

i'm a useless gay okay :(((((

That Dipshit Nuwanda

neilll that is nOt new information

That Dipshit Nuwanda** has changed the group chat name to **Neil is Gay, Let's Talk About It

Smartass Ginger ™

Wait is there a new Todd and Neil development???

That Dipshit Nuwanda

meeks!

NEIL'S GOING TO TELL TODD HE LOVES HIM

Neil Perry

In! Fact!

Smartass Ginger ™

ooooooOOOOOOOOOO

Smartass Ginger ™

Wow there's so much gay energy in this chat

That Dipshit Nuwanda

That's the beauty of it meeks

Neil Perry

Okay we can talk about it later if we must!
I'm w/ todd at the library rn

That Dipshit Nuwanda

GAY

Smartass Ginger ™

aggressive wink

Neil looks over at Todd who's looking at his calculus homework with complete and utter confusion. The day plays through Neil's brain like a film strip but Neil stops it at the dorm room earlier.

He's Todd's favorite too.

Kind Of A Cult Thing

Chapter Summary

in which the first dead poets meeting of the school year is held, Knox joins the society, Todd feels guilty, and Neil has an extreme amount of angst

Chapter Notes

QUICK INFO ABOUT THIS CHAPTER: just wanted to tell you all that this chapter contains underaged drinking, talks about a past suicide attempt, and describes depression. just wanted to let you know! if you would like to skip this chapter for content reasons, please feel free to comment below asking for a summary of the chapter and i would be happy to give you a briefing of it so you can still read on.

hey hey hey!
sorry for the delay on this chapter; it ended up being over 2k longer than intended (i know, i'm out of control). this might mean that the next one will be delayed a bit too, but i really hope you all bear with me and that this is enough to sate you all until i'm done with chapter four.
thank you all for the kind comments! all the encouragement really helps me keep going; plus it's always nice to see that people are enjoying reading this fic as much as i'm enjoying writing it.
sending all of my adoration,
auxctor

Groupchat: ***We All Wish We Were Walt Whitman***

6:49

That Dipshit Nuwanda

guys, REMEMBER

my room, 8:30

for the luve of god, pls bring food

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

What room are you even in?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

cameron, i LITERALLY saw you like two minutes ago

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

But what room are you in?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

3rd floor, i'm sure if you look hard enough you can find it

Neil Perry

Don't be an ass, Wanda

he's in 310

8:26

Smartass Ginger ™

Guys, I'm here.

But I'm just chilling in my car.

I don't even know what building you guys

are in.

GUYS I DON'T KNOW HOW THIS CAMPUS WORKS

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Meeks! you! should! have! come! to!

our school!

Smartass Ginger ™

But

H🍍A🍍R🍍V🍍A🍍R🍍D🍍

Okay, but seriously, I'm just wandering now.

I have literally no idea where to go.

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

We're in Weir Hall.

Smartass Ginger ™

SEE CAMERON IS HELPFUL

That Dipshit Nuwanda

CAMERON!

how are we going to convince meeeks to transfer now?

we have not colateArl

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

What even is that sentence supposed to say?

Wait, were you trying to spell collateral?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

fuC you dicck

Smartass Ginger ™

Okay stop bullying Cameron.

Uh guys I think I'm lost.

Neil Perry

where are you??

Smartass Ginger ™

I see the stadium and a whole lot of fucking trees.

Neil Perry

Just head East?? Were the farthest one Eas.

if you get to the other parkingg garage you've gone to far

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

Okay, all of you are horrendous texters.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

noboddy asked yoU RICHARD

Neil Perry

Guys u can fight after Meeks finds the dorm

…

…Meeks?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

MEEKS aRE U ALIVE?

Neil Perry

Meeks, just keep going East

Though for real are u okay

That Dipshit Nuwanda

GO EAST

U CAN DO IT MEEKS

GO EAST

Neil Perry

GO EAST

Toddy Boy

i leave my phone for ten minutes to charge…

and this is what i come back to?

wth is happening

Neil Perry

Pray for Meeks!!

Also tell him to go East

Toddy Boy

neil if you're gonna answer...you're

literally five feet away from me.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

teLL Meeks 2 go east

ALSO can knox join us pls

Toddy Boy

uh… go east meeks?

who's knox?

Neil Perry

yes of course!!!

He's NUWANDAS roommate

Wtf y did that autocorrect to all caps

Toddy Boy

oh cool

That Dipshit Nuwanda

its been like 15 minues

i think mEeks is deaad

Toddy Boy

meeks are you alright?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

k sriously think meeks

is DEAD

f in chat

f

Neil Perry

F

Toddy Boy

f

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

F

Smartass Ginger ™

f for me

That Dipshit Nuwanda

MEEKS YPUR ALIVE

THOT U DIED

Smartass Ginger ™

Weir hall right?

Third floor?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

YE S BABES

Neil Perry

I—

k Wanda

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Cameron is hereee

knox is Here

Neil Perry

He lives there lmao

That Dipshit Nuwanda

MEEKS

!!!!!

IS

!!!!!

HERE

!!!!!

okay Neil where the fucp are you n todd

When Neil looks up at Todd, Todd is already looking at him

Neil smiles at Todd.“You ready to go?”

Todd nods and Neil stands, holding out his hand to help Todd up even though he doesn’t need it; Neil just always itches to feel Todd’s skin against his. They talk in that small talk way that one does when passing classmates as they walk down the hall and up one flight of stairs to get to Charlie and Knox’s room. The door is slightly ajar. Neil can hear their loud voices drifting out into the hall.

Cameron has pulled the chair from Knox’s desk to sit awkwardly between Charlie and Knox’s beds, and he does a dorky little wave when he sees Neil and Todd. Charlie is lounging back on his own bed next to a pile of junk food, multiple cases of beer, and a bottle of vodka with Knox sitting at the foot; Knox is saying something along the lines of “No, I don’t *mind*, just when you invite people over a heads up would be great—”.

And there’s Meeks, leaning against Charlie’s desk, seemingly waiting for Todd and Neil.

“Meeks!” Neil grins and Meeks smiles back; Neil pulls him into a quick hug because it’s been too goddamn long.

Meeks has barely gotten out a ‘how was your summer’ when Charlie interrupts their conversation. “Neil, Cameron’s being a buzzkill; can we kick him out?”

He sounds like a tattle taling child.

“I just said to be quiet!” Cameron says, putting his hands in the air, offering some sort of surrender.

“Who cares?” Charlie rolls his eyes.

“I’m just saying that if there’s a noise complaint and the RA comes to find us— we’re underage and we’re drinking. That’s all I’m saying!”

Neil sighs dramatically. “Okay, not taking sides or anything but it’s 8:30 on a Saturday night; I think we’re alright. I’d be surprised if anyone on this entire floor is asleep before 4 am, Cam.” Neil turns to Charlie. “But no, we’re not kicking him out.”

“Yeah,” Knox says. He’s moved back to sit on his own bed and the can of beer Charlie gave him hisses when he opens it. “Nobody fucking cares about the noise level. You should hear the people in the room on the left of ours.”

Charlie groans, an annoyed agreement.

Neil raises his eyebrows. “Who lives left of you?”

Knox shrugs. “No clue.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Meeks asks, taking a seat in the chair from Charlie’s desk.

“Whoever they are, they fuck super loudly,” Knox says.

Charlie nods, feigning seriousness.“And all the goddamn time too”

Knox laughs but nods in agreement. “Literally; at least three times a day.”

“I mean, it’s free porn but still—” Charlie says, handing Neil a beer.

“You’re disgusting,” Knox says, throwing Charlie an appalled look.

Charlie gives a mischievous grin. He then attempts to throw a beer at Todd. The only issue is he gives Todd no warning, so Todd fumbles and the can slips out of his hands, bursting on the dorm floor.

“Nuwanda—” Cameron groans. Todd starts apologizing profusely even though it’s not his fault in any way, shape, or form. He’s on edge; Neil wonders if it’s because he hasn’t hung around Knox before. Todd always gets like this with new people.

“You can’t just throw drinks,” Knox says, clearly tired of Charlie’s daily bullshit. Neil feels slightly bad for him; Neil loves Charlie but he’s a person who takes some getting used to.

“Well, are we going to actually read poetry?” Neil asks anyone who’s listening as he helps clean the beer off the floor, ignoring the bickering that’s started.

“Lord knows,” Meeks laughs, watching Charlie and Knox get into it. Todd and Neil both go to sit on the floor, against the wall between the heads of Charlie and Knox’s beds. After a moment, Charlie takes a break from arguing to hand Todd a new beer and Neil grins at Todd. Todd smiles back widely and full-heartedly. They’re all in their regular

poetry circle, and it makes Neil happy; to see them all there, all where they belong.

The night grows late quickly, and soon the poets' meeting is much more chaos and conversation than poetry and prose. Neil's okay with that; this is their first time all being together in months and all he really cares about is the fact that he's seeing everyone.

And, at some point, Knox gets officially initiated into the Dead Poets Society.

"So this isn't a cult thing, right?" Knox asks, sitting up properly to see everyone when he talks.

"No," Neil laughs as Charlie says "Depends on your definition of cult."

"Now I'm concerned."

"It's not a cult," Meeks confirms; Meeks and Cameron have both pulled their chairs further into the circle, so Meeks is close enough to give Knox a reassuring pat on the knee.

Charlie takes a drink from either his third or fourth beer of the night. "This could be considered… kind of a cult thing."

"What about this is cult-y?" Todd asks. Neil feels triumphant as he looks over to Todd; it's always a victory when Todd talks in meetings, even after all these months.

"Do you not remember last year? The candles? The 'god of the cave'?" Charlie reminds them emphatically.

Neil laughs loudly in that unguarded, slightly tipsy way."You were the one who made that meeting go all cult-y 'Wanda"

"Well," Knox smiles, "I'd be happy to join your kind of cult-y non-cult."

"Wonderful," Charlie says as he grabs the bottle of vodka from the quickly disappearing pile of snacks. As soon as he gets it open, he takes a big drink and recoils slightly from the taste before offering it to Neil. He and Charlie both fucking hate the taste of vodka, and yet whenever there's alcohol, vodka is always their poison of choice.

"Welcome to the Dead Poets Society," Neil says, raising the bottle in some sort of toast to Knox.

Meeks, who's still working through his first beer, smiles in his friendly way at Knox. "You seem to be pretty legitimate poet material."

"Thank you," Knox laughs as he goes to grab another snack from the pile on Charlie's bed. He ends up just collapsing next to Charlie and stays there.

"It's good to have you," Todd says quietly from his place next to Neil. Everyone looks at Todd and grins, but they all know Todd well enough to look away before he notices and gets all flustered.

"Speaking of Knox joining the society; I actually met this guy in my physics course who might be poet material too," Meeks says.

"Tell us more!" Charlie replies a little too loudly. Neil feels Todd move closer to him, leaning into him the way that he sometimes does when they sit next to each other for a while; their legs are almost overlapping. There's this sparking warmth that Neil feels someplace beneath his throat. The sensation begins between his collar bones and runs down his chest like a lightning bolt or a spider web fracture; a feeling that cracks and sizzles through him, stunning but also debilitating.

Neil catches Charlie looking at him with raised eyebrows. Goddammit, why does Neil always have to wear his heart so heavily on his sleeve?

"You're being too loud," Cameron says to Charlie, pulling his gaze away from Neil and Todd.

Charlie doesn't snap back; he just steals the bottle of vodka from Neil and hands it to Cameron. "Here."

"Why?" Cameron asks, pulling back in his chair as though he's afraid Charlie bites.

"You're getting annoying; shut up and drink that. You'll probably be less whiny if you're drunk."

Surprisingly, Cameron listens and takes a sip from the foul but effective alcohol.

Meeks tells them all about the possible next poet; a guy named Gerard who's apparently just as nerdy as Meeks but also an avid reader of prose. After he's done, the conversation moves quickly as they share their lives and tell stories and recount their summers. Even Todd talks about his life; he skips over all the sour parts, but he talks all the

same.

Everyone gets drunker than intended.

Cameron, who's never had anything to drink at any former poets meetings (or probably in his life), clearly wasn't paying attention to how much he was drinking and miscalculated somewhere because he's drunk enough that Knox and Meeks have to help him back to his room at a little past two. Neil offers, but Neil is nearly as bad. His words aren't working and it's funny as hell and his thoughts are fuzzy with alcohol. And soon he can't stand from the impact of the liquor and everything is tunneling and smudging and he misses Todd even though Todd's sitting next to him, not even half as drunk as Neil.

Neil didn't mean to get shitfaced. He had been taking it easy until his brain started to drift to a sadder and darker place; then he'd started drinking a lot very quickly. Which is a terrible idea for so many reasons.

Sometime around four, Meeks and Todd seem to decide that it's time for the evening to draw to an end. Cameron's already back in his dorm and Knox is passed out on Charlie's bed, but both Neil and Charlie are awake and far drunker than they should be, so a mostly sober Meeks and a slightly buzzed Todd are the only voices of reason.

"I think it's time for you all go to bed," Meeks announces on behalf of nerds and makers of good decisions everywhere.

"Borrrrrringggggggg," Charlie says in a loud— almost rowdy— tone from the place he's laying on the floor; Neil doesn't remember when he moved there. Neil tries to stand and nearly falls; Todd must have foreseen this and has an arm around his torso before he can. Meeks has to help Todd keep Neil steady; helping someone down the stairs when they're shitfaced and you're smaller than them is a dangerous game on one's own.

Next thing he knows, Neil is lying on his bed and watching blankly as Todd gets ready for bed. He tries to pretend he's not looking when Todd takes his shirt off (he's seen Todd shirtless dozens of times but it always feels impolite to gawk when Todd is something that makes Neil's heart race). But pretending is hard when drunk.

"Hasanyone ever told you 'owpretty your eyes are?" Neil's words are slurring, staying longer on syllables than they need to. They aren't snagging on their way up his throat like Todd's do; they're sticking, slow and sludgy.

Todd smiles and laughs slightly; he's smiled more this past month than he did all of senior year and this past summer put together. It makes Neil's chest warm. It fills a glass that Neil didn't realize was empty; it fills something in him and it's like he didn't realize he was parched until this very moment. The moment he has the sweet relief. And yet, he also aches for Todd to be happy in a way that hurts; he wants Todd to have the world in the same way he wants blood in his veins. Neil would probably die without that stained glass smile.

"Thank you, Neil." Todd looks a little red. Neil wants to reach out and touch Todd's lips but Todd is too far. He settles for a moment of just looking; he very rarely just lets himself stare.

"Todd?"

"Yes?" Todd asks.

"Are you gay?

Neil is too drunk for subtlety. He's too hammered to be smart or smooth or consider if he should be asking Todd. All Neil can focus on is the silence that follows as he waits for an answer; if Todd is straight, Neil is motherfucking screwed. He doesn't really know what would be worse, though; a straight Todd Anderson or a queer and uninterested Todd Anderson.

Even though the anticipation is thick, Neil has no dread or fear. It's just a series of questions, not a collection of feelings; parts of Neil have become apathetic and confused with alcohol.

Being drunk is funny like that; it makes Neil unable to pinpoint which way his mind orients.

"Neil, you should be getting to bed. You're going to have one hell of a hangover tomorrow," Todd says quietly. Neil wants to protest; he wants to ask Todd again. But he knows— even in this state— that he shouldn't press; Todd would tell Neil if he wanted Neil to know. And Todd's right; he should sleep.

Neil's thoughts slide and slip and he feels dizzy with vodka and beer and feelings.

It's three days later when Neil gets a chance to apologize. He spends his Sunday recovering from possibly the worst hangover of his life and

saying a brief, somewhat lethargic goodbye to Meeks. The poets had originally planned to get lunch but Neil gets dizzy from just standing and Charlie won't stop complaining about a splitting headache and Cameron looks like he got hit by a fucking truck. Knox sleeps a full eighteen hours and when he does get up, he looks peaked and exhausted. Even Todd looks like he'd rather die than go out right now.

Monday passes without incident. But Neil needs to talk to Todd; he gets his chance Tuesday evening after dinner since he and Todd are going back to their dorm to study together.

"Todd; I need to apologize," Neil says as soon as Todd shuts the dorm room door behind them.

"What for?"

"For Saturday,"

"Why are you apologizing to me? You should apologize to yourself; you looked dead on Sunday," Todd says, sitting on his bed to take off his shoes.

"No; I'm apologizing for asking about your sexuality."

Todd's head snaps up to look at Neil but he just responds with a simple and tiny "Oh."

He looks uncomfortable but Neil needs to get this out so that Todd knows he doesn't have to say anything he doesn't want to.

"I just know that for me I had some people ask me about mine before I was ready to come out and it was really uncomfortable because I wanted it to be on my terms and even if I wasn't gay, I was confused and it still would have bothered me. And whether you're straight or not— it's none of my business. And you're my best friend no matter what."

Neil is still standing in the place between their beds, just about two feet in front of Todd.

Todd opens his mouth to say something then closes it again. He pauses before taking another go at speech. "I appreciate that. Because I feel like— I don't know. Just y-you're— you're my best friend Neil and I feel like I owe you—"

"Owe me what?"

“I don’t know. An answer. An e-e-explanation of why I’m not giving you an answer. Because you’ve done more for me than you’ll ever know this past year and I-I feel like in things like this; that you deserve something from me, even if— even if it’s not something I’m ready to give.”

Neil looks at him long and hard; Todd can only hold the gaze for a second before shying away and retreating back to his shell. He never thought about this. Neil never suspected that Todd would feel in debt; this kind of kindness just comes naturally to Neil. Every cell in Neil’s body yearns to take Todd’s anxiety away—Neil would take a year with the anxiety if it gave Todd a moment of relief.

“You don’t owe me an answer or an explanation. You don’t owe anyone anything, Todd. Especially not me; I’m your friend, not someone you need to feel guilty about,” Neil says.

He sits down next to Todd. Todd nods as an answer to the things Neil’s offered, but his response comes out small.

“I’m just so confused.”

Neil isn’t positive Todd means this about his sexuality but he knocks his knee against Todd’s in what he hopes is a comforting gesture. No matter what, he’s here for Todd. He tells Todd as much.

“Thank y-you.”

“Is there anything I can do for you? Anything at all, related or not.”

“I actually— I actually wanted to ask you—” Todd takes a deep breath as though this is hard to say; it probably is. Neil doesn’t quite understand Todd’s anxiety so he doesn’t pretend to but Neil knows his own type of anxiety. Around his father anxiety is a toxic, constant companion.

“Take it slow,” Neil reminds him softly.

“I wanted to ask if you’d like— to read my new poem,” Todd says.

“Hell yes.”

Todd grins at Neil’s enthusiasm. Neil doesn’t even think of this as a favor to Todd; reading Todd’s work is a rare gift.

“You can edit too if you’d like.” Todd has started to dig through his

backpack. After a minute of searching, he hands Neil a manila folder.

“I can try but you know I’m shit at writing.”

“But you *read* a lot of poetry.”

That’s a fair point; Neil consumes poetry like he’s starving. Even though Neil has never been a writer— and probably never will be— ever since English class junior year Neil has loved poetry. Junior year had been the first year that he’d taken a class with Mr. Keating.

And Neil loves Todd’s poetry more than any other poet’s work.

That night, Neil and Todd spend the evening sitting across from each other on Todd’s bed and working on Todd's poems. Todd actually has more than one poem; he has multiple poems and just the beginning scraps of a few new ones.

Neil points things out and highlights lines he likes and Todd edits. Todd is always fretful about showing people his writing— poetry is a tender thing— but with Neil, he seems excited. Neil sometimes forgets that although Todd is shy, he’s also brave.

And then Todd helps Neil as he recites a monologue; Neil’s recently decided to audition for the spring production. Even though it’s ages away he’s anxious to prepare and forever loves working at his acting. Todd is constructive but kind, both creative and honest.

That night, after they’re done with that and have hacked away at some homework, they just talk. They confide in each other the same way they did over the summer. Todd says that his parents haven’t texted him about getting to school okay; despite the fact that it’s been over three weeks since Todd left for college, his parents haven’t made contact with him at all and he’s not expecting for them to do so any time soon. He laughs that his parents probably don’t notice he’s gone but Neil knows it’s not a joke. His parents shower Jeffery with love to the point that they have nothing left to give Todd; the only times they acknowledge Todd is to tell him he’s not enough.

“Well you are,” Neil says when Todd talks about the last time his parents told him they were unmoved by Todd’s accomplishments.

“I’m what?”

“Enough,” Neil says. “You are enough. You’re plenty. You’re perfect to all of us; the boys and I.”

Todd is soft when he speaks next, “Thank you.”

You’ve always been perfect to me is what Neil wants to say

When Neil talks about his Dad and the box incident (omitting the part about Neil lying about which college he’s attending), Todd tells him he’s not a disappointment.

“Neil, you know; I’m- I’m constantly amazed by you.”

They talk late into the night, some of which is much lighter conversation. At some point, Todd falls asleep and Neil moves back to his own bed. He glances over at Todd— this boy that gives him both butterflies and bravery— and loves Todd so hard that his chest hurts.

The next few weeks come quickly

But then, the last week of October, it happens. The thing Neil always fears. Or the thing he forever dreads.

“Neil?” Todd questions. He’s sitting at his desk, work spread out in front of him.

Neil looks over at Todd from where he’s buried under the covers of his bed. He’s not quite sure when Todd got back from god knows where but it’s nearly dinner time and Neil’s still not hungry. “Yeah?”

“Didn’t you have a class this afternoon?” Todd asks.

Neil just presses his palm to his face; no response.

“Have you— have you gotten out of bed today?”

Neil rolls away; he loves Todd for his caring and concern but he also hates worrying him. He doesn’t want to add stress to Todd’s life and he wants Todd to think of him as a passionate actor, not a sad boy with a messy history. “Todd— please don’t worry about me—”

“Neil—”

“I’m okay—”

“Neil. Have you gotten out of bed today?” Todd asks a bit firmly, coming to sit next to Neil’s bed so that he’s just about eye level with a horizontal Neil. Todd is not only a worrier by nature but he also has

good reason for fretting over Neil and his depression.

Senior year of high school, Neil had tried to kill himself.

It was Todd who had found him. It was Todd who had called the ambulance. It was Todd who had slept on uncomfortable chairs for those first few days, either in the lobby or in Neil's room as the nurses would permit, just to make sure Neil had someone close by. Charlie had told Neil a few months later that he had overheard Todd praying about him multiple times.

Todd has never believed in God. Neil knows this.

They didn't talk about it. In Neil's defense, he really wanted to forget The Incident had ever happened. In Todd's defense, he would never bring up anything that would get Neil stirred up. Todd didn't bring up things, period. But today, Neil feels paralyzed with his chronic and recurring darkness.

"Neil, please tell me; have you been in bed all day?" Todd asks again.

"Yeah. Yeah, I have. Christ, I've tried to get up and do things; I just can't fucking do it, Todd."

Todd reaches up to take Neil's hand and squeezes it. "I know you have. Why didn't you text me and t-tell me it was one of the— one of the bad days?"

If depression is a cruel cannibal, shame is its twin brother.

"I didn't want to worry you," Neil says. He still manages to sound like his normal, strong, forever energized self despite the way his brain is caving in.

Everything is slow and painful. Depression is this strange breed of numb; every feeling is dulled. Except for the pain. This dark dread. His brain is self-destructive sometimes; a bomb that's trying to go off, but the death it causes is time-consuming and agonizing.

"Have you eaten?" Todd asks.

"No."

"I'll go get you something—"

"You don't—"

“You— you used to do it for me, Neil.”

Most of senior year, Neil had gotten Todd’s lunch for him. The cafeteria was always deafening and chaotic and after one afternoon where Todd had dealt with a god awful anxiety attack that had morphed into a full-on panic, Neil started bringing him his food.

Neil had needed help from Todd last year but pretended he didn’t. He pretended to always leak confidence until he reached his breaking point; he’s been trying to learn to be honest and accept help from Todd since.

“Okay. Thank you, Todd.”

“Of course.” Todd stands up to leave.

Depression is a beast that makes the entire world pale. It imitates loneliness and laziness and worthlessness, even though Neil is none of those things. It makes him feel void of purpose and sick with self-loathing.

The darkness tells Neil to hate himself and he can’t help but listen.

Before Todd can leave, Neil lets his thoughts slip out. His fear of being seen as human.

“Please don’t worry about me. Can you tell The Poets I’m sick?”

Todd turns back to look at him but then nods slowly. “You can just be honest— they’ll understand.”

“No. They can’t— I don’t want to worry them. And I hate when they see me like this.” Neil feels immediately irritated; Todd never tells the poets when he’s anxious, except for Neil. Todd can be such a goddamn hypocrite. *I hate when* you *see me like this*, Neil thinks

“Why? W-why can’t they see you like this?”

“I’m supposed to be better,” Neil says. The fear of being needy is coming back with a new wave of self-loathing.

“You are better. This is still going to happen sometimes ‘nd that’s okay.”

They had all seen Neil at his absolute worst.

After the suicide attempt, Neil had to stay in the hospital for a while.

Afterward, his father pretended nothing had happened; no therapy, no medicine. Neil had made a promise; he was going to survive this. If not for himself, for the poets.

Neil had done what he could; he tried to talk to the school counselor weekly. Keating started checking in with Neil at least twice a week and would let Neil (and often the rest of the poets) eat in his classroom. The poets tried to pitch in any way they could; Charlie started trying harder to make Neil laugh, even when he knew Neil was too fucking depressed to find anything funny. Meeks would let him copy his homework. Cameron started sending Neil stupidly kind little videos he found on the internet. Neil noticed that Todd never turned his phone on silent ever again, even during the night. They all tried to invite Neil over as often as his father would allow and called Neil for hours on end when he was imprisoned in his father's house.

In addition, little positive messages and poems started showing up in Neil's locker and between the pages of his textbooks. Nobody claimed them, but Neil knew who had put them there; they all did. Only one of the poets was that talented of a writer. That particular poet was also a god-awful liar but Neil never called him out on it.

Of course, Neil was still depressed. As much as he wished that all of that would fix the problem the truth was, they couldn't; depression was a disease that gnawed painfully at everything Neil was. But it was enough. It was livable even if things with his father were miserable. And the first thing Neil did after moving out was to schedule a therapy appointment and then a psychiatry appointment.

"I just don't like making everyone worry," Neil says. He felt like a burden all that time last year; he doesn't want to weigh on them again.

"They'd just want to help."

"I don't need their help."

"Neil— please don't push everyone away." There's a silent *like last time* that follows the statement that Neil receives despite Todd not actually speaking it. Todd comes back to the side of Neil's bed to offer him another reassuring hand; Neil doesn't take it.

"I'm okay; just let me be."

"Neil—"

“Just let me be,” Neil snaps.

Todd does.

The Neil Perry Support Group

Chapter Summary

in which todd and neil go to the bookstore and knox gets vibe checked by charlie
oh and neil has even more angst!

Chapter Notes

hello my dears!
i don't have a ton to say except OH BOY, do i have some plans for this fic.
also? we love me constantly writing about neil doing his biology homework as i procrastinate my own biology work to write my fic because i love my poets. anyway, thank you for reaching chapter four. please remember to leave kudos! and comments make my heart happy < 3
much love,
auxctor

QUICK DISCLAIMER: mental illness is different for everyone so it feels important to say that the way i portray neil's depression and todd's anxiety (which we'll see more in the next few chapters) is only based on personal experience and the experience of other people i know; depression looks different for everyone! this portrayal of depression, anxiety, and other heavy topics is not law. just felt like i should put this out there.

Neil is good at a lot of things, but knowing exactly what to do after conflict between him and Todd arises is a weak spot for him. In his defense, Todd is even worse at this.

Neil doesn’t ever know what’s going through Todd’s head; he doesn’t even know if these count as fights, but they always go the same way. Todd misunderstanding and Neil snapping. When Todd’s upset with Neil, they don’t normally fight; Todd just tends to avoid him like the motherfucking plague until Neil figures out that he’s gone wrong somewhere. But when the tables are turned, Neil gets frustrated quickly but feels obligated to fix this thing between them the moment he goes from boiling to room temperature again.

Neil feels like Todd should always make sense to him. (But he doesn't; that's kind of just how people work, really). Things have been uncomfortable since the awkward spat between them; Neil can't stand awkward. Neil can't deal with the tension. He can't handle Todd being upset and guilty; plus he loathes sitting on these things.

The episode of depression ends a few days later, and Neil is grateful. But he's not quite sure what to say to Todd. Neil watches Todd work on what looks like some sort of essay across the room in the tense silence.

"Todd?"

"Yeah?" Todd turns around in his desk chair.

It's Neil and Todd; they figure it out. They always do.

Knox is the third person to find out that Neil is in love with Todd. It is, once again, Charlie's fault thank you very much.

It's the day after Neil starts to feel normal again and Neil, Todd, Charlie and Knox have just spent the afternoon studying; or, to be more accurate, Neil studying, Todd writing, Knox moping about his extremely recent falling out with his girlfriend and Charlie, well, being Charlie. They're sitting in Knox and Charlie's room, all doing their own things; at least until Charlie starts asking about Knox's girlfriend. Or, well, ex-girlfriend.

"Wait, wait, wait," Charlie says, sitting up from where he's splayed out on his own bed. "You're telling me that this girl— the only reason this girl dated you is because you wouldn't stop asking her out?"

"Yes," Knox mutters quietly. He shifts uncomfortably in his desk chair.

"First of all, that's mega fucking creepy," Charlie says. "Second of all, why did you think that would last? She clearly doesn't like you."

"Well, thanks for putting it so delicately."

"Knox, he's got a point," Neil says, closing his computer and setting it beside him on the floor where he's working, leaned up against Knox's bed. After he's lost a few days to depression, he's always itching to rejoin the poets and the petty conversation. "If she told you to stop

you should have stopped."

"And that's not a healthy way to start a relationship, and not to like— y'know be rude or anything like that— but she might have just gone out with you to get you off her back," Todd adds.

"Damn," Charlie says, raising his eyebrows Todd. "Anderson's really out here spitting facts."

"Oh, shit, that did sound harsh, didn't it?" Todd says, looking embarrassed but words surprisingly coming out clean. He pulls his knees up to his chest where he's sitting on Knox's bed. When Todd swears in front of the group, that's a double success; he isn't fretting and fussing over his phrasing .

"No— I get what you guys are saying." Knox says, putting his face in his hands and letting out a frustrated sigh. There's a moment of silence as they all start to get back to their work before Todd breaks it.

"Oh—" Todd says loudly and they all turn to look at him. "I have a lecture in seven minutes."

He quickly puts his papers into a folder, shoves it in his worn messenger bag (the one that still has Jeffery's name written on the strap) and then goes to leave.

"Bye Todd!" Neil says loudly, so that Todd will catch it clearly in his rush. When he and Todd talked last evening, they didn't entirely talk about Neil getting pissy at Todd, but they seem to have slipped back into their normal routine; Neil and Todd are Neil and Todd again. It's a relief.

"Bye!" Todd says. He stops in the doorway and turns around, opening his mouth like he wants to say something more but then seems to change his mind and leaves. There's a moment of silence before Knox speaks.

"Wait so Neil?"

"Yeah?" Neil asks, looking away from the empty doorway and opening back up his computer.

"How did you find someone like Todd?"

Neil looks up at Knox. "What do you mean?"

“You two seem to have a pretty solid relationship; how long have you guys been together?”

Neil chokes on the surprise and Charlie breaks into uproarious laughter.

“What? What did I say?”

Neil finally finds words. “Todd and I aren’t dating.”

“Oh, shit— sorry, I kind of thought—,” Knox says awkwardly.

“Oh, no no no, I’m still gayer than a picnic basket,” Neil says, now smiling too. “But Todd and I aren’t together.”

“He wishes!” Charlie contributes.

“Charlie— have you no chill?” Neil asks, trying to sound strict but still grinning.

“Wait wait, I’m confused,” Knox says, who’s probably getting whiplash from the speed of a conversation he’s never been a part of before. “Back up a little.”

“Neil is hella whipped for Todd but hasn’t done anything about it,” Charlie says.

Neil surrenders. “Yes, yes, I have feelings for Todd.”

“Well, it seems like he likes you back.”

“I don’t even know if he’s into guys—”

Charlie takes a huge sigh, like he’s sick of having the umpteenth ‘is Todd straight’ debate. “Neil! He must be; gays just flock towards each other. And Cameron is already our token het.”

“Charlie—”

“I’ll prove my point— Knox are you completely straight?”

“You don’t just ask people—,” Neil starts.

Knox is laughing. “No, it’s fine; but no, I’m not straight. I’m bisexual.”

“See?” Charlie looks a little surprised, as though he wasn’t expecting his plan to play out that well. He turns back to Neil. “The point

stands.”

Neil laughs and just shakes his head at Charlie. He tries to move the conversation away; as much as he confides in Charlie, he really doesn’t want to talk about Todd’s sexuality. They all need to respect Todd’s privacy.

Luckily Charlie starts going on a tangent about a professor he loathes, and that’s that.

When Neil’s phone lets out the dreaded ring the first day of November, Neil knows that it’s his father’s long overdue phone call. Before Neil picks up, he takes a final big breath of air like it’s his last meal. He’s already sick of this all.

The phone call starts out the casual sort of sour. Neil answers the questions how he should and asks about his father’s job like he’s supposed to. He’s walking back from class, and he’s about two minutes away from the dorm when his father drops today’s bomb.

Mr. Perry clears his throat.“What room are you in?

“I— what?”

“Your mother wants to send you some sort of medical books. We’ll need your dorm address.”

Neil can feel himself starting to panic; he has a dorm address, sure, but his address is not a Harvard address. He’s not even in the right fucking state. “Could you send it to the Dalton’s house? I’m seeing Charlie this weekend, I could pick them up—”

“Why can’t you just do what I say, Neil? You know I don’t like having you around Charles Dalton and your mother wants to send the books to your room; what’s your address?”

Neil feels sick. The idea to get out of this one comes, but the fear of being caught in his idiotic lie is so heavy.

“Uh— I forget the room number?”

“You forgot your room?” His father says, sounding like he believes it. Neil still doesn’t like whatever is tangled in his father’s tone.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m on my way back from class; give me a minute? I’ll tell you once I get there.”

His dad sighs. “Dumbass.”

There’s this way that Neil's father speaks; this professional father-ly quality that makes straight up insults sound like perfectly acceptable responses. It doesn’t take away the sting; just Neil’s ability to separate overreaction from reality.

Smartass Ginger ™

Meeks what the hell is your room address

Pls its an emergency

Please see this

Asap

911

Neil’s father starts saying something about how Neil needs to get better at memorizing information; something about how Neil is wasting his time. A comment talking about when Neil was still trying to memorize his social security number and he had to call his father to ask where he could find it because he was forgetting the last two digits. How frustrating it is that Neil can’t even do basic human tasks.

Why isn’t Meeks responding?

Neil walks an extra circle around the building, praying. He’s trying to ignore his father but the words are getting sharper and more off topic; it’s evolving into comments about how Neil needs to shape up. This always happens; the conversation grows further and further away from whatever minor thing Neil has done and deeper into the well of Neil’s flaws the longer his father talks. Neil is disappointing in this, sorely slacking in that. Neil hasn’t sent his mother more than a single text since he left; does Neil realize how rude that is? How will Neil

ever be a man worth anything if he can't do any of these easy things?

Meeks, where the hell are you? Text back.

"A neanderthal could do some of the things you can't, Neil," his father says.

His dad is getting louder as Neil takes his third, fourth, fifth lap around the dorm. He never knows what will set his father off; the stupidest things like this make his father scalding with anger.

Maybe his father just has a certain amount of insults he is required to throw at Neil and he's very behind on his yearly quota or something. Neil's starting to get flashbacks of last year. He's remembering how his father got even more angry than this during The Incident. He's remembering—

Meeks, look at your fucking phone. For the love of God.

Neil is panicking. He's nauseous and he's starting to shiver even though it's not too cold. What should he do? He's going to cry and Neil can't cry. Not here. Not now. This will make it all worse; pathetic is one of his father's favorite words.

Neil's phone chimes.

Yeah sure

It's 167

Jameison Hall

Are you okay?

Neil isn't able to respond until a while later, after he's told his father the room address, gotten off the phone, and thrown up in the first floor bathroom of the dorm building.
God, his father is right. Neil is *pathetic.*

He opens up his messages with Meeks as soon as he climbs the stairs to his room and almost tells Meeks. His fingers hover over the keys: *I need to talk, my dad's fingers are starting to grip around my throat again, like they did last year. His lectures are back. He's starting to get horrible.*

The flashbacks might be coming back. Am I overreacting? God, Meeks, what do I do?

Instead he says:

Thank you you're a life saver

I'll explain later

Yeah, I'm good

That night, even though he can hear Todd's steady and comfortable breath as he sleeps, Neil is restless. He tosses and turns, thinking. Neil's not sure how the hell he's going to keep this lie up; but, what's the alternative? He doesn't want to know.

Neil is woken up by a loud text notification. It's a Thursday and Neil has slept in; he has a lecture in about an hour and it's honestly a godsend that it wakes Neil up; he probably would have slept through class. Todd is out. Neil distantly wonders where.

That Dipshit Nuwanda *has added* ***Knox Overstreet*** *to* ***Neil is Gay, Let's Talk About It***

Neil sits there for a moment.

Neil Perry *has changed* ***Knox Overstreet*** *to* ***Knoxious.***

Knoxious

Wait what

Neil Perry

Hi knox, welcome to the group chat

where we talk about my feelings for Todd

Appererantly

That Dipshit Nuwanda

KNOX UR THE ONLY OTHER

PERSON WHO KNOWS ABT TODD
AND NEIL

except for meeks and i

we need to hElp neil through this hard,

gayy time

Knoxious

Oh okay lmao

Neil Perry

i just don't know what to do

Literally where tf do i startttt

That Dipshit Nuwanda** has changed the group chat name to **Neil Is A Sucker (And not in the sexy way)

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Wat happened to "just" doing the startling confession of love??

Neil Perry

Well, that's still where I'm going.

Just how do I sayy it?

Where do i begin?

when Is a chill time to be like

"yup todd just highkey in love with you"

Neil Perry** has changed the group chat name to **It's Too Early For This Gay Shit

Knoxious

You should serenade him

That Dipshit Nuwanda

OH SHIT YES

PLS TELL ME THERE"S GOING TO BE A MUSICAL NUMBER
PLS SERENADE HIM

Neil Perry

nooooo

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Ur the one who said hgo big or go home

Neil Perry

wait actually

,,,that is a concept

what if i did

Smartass Ginger ™

...

Is that a good idea?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

SERENADE HIM

Knoxious

SERENADE HIM

Smartass Ginger ™

GUYS NO DON'T ENCOURAGE HIM

Neil Perry

But it’s an idea!

That Dipshit Nuwanda

thEres gota be flowers

Knoxious

And you should write him a sonnet

Smartass Ginger ™

Okay but guys, it's Todd. Todd would be embarrassed as hell.

Would he vibe with the huge theatre-y confession?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

CANDLES

Knoxious

CHOCOLATES

Smartass Ginger ™

nOOOO

That Smartass Ginger ™ *has changed the group chat name to* ***Knox and Nuwanda shut up***

Neil Perry

Oh damn yeah meeks has a point

I don't want to embarras Todd

NEW IDEAS GUYS

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Can I officiate the wedding???

Neil Perry

Knoxious

Just tell him you love him for God's sake

Big gestures are overrated

That Dipshit Nuwanda

...weren't you just telling me

That onE time u showed up at your girlfriend's

college with flowers and a love letter

like in the middle of a history course or somethin

That Dipshit Nuwanda *has changed the group chat name to* ***Neil is the only person here with even the slightest chance of getting laid right now and Knox is a hypocrite***

Knoxious

…

first of all, she broke up with me so that point is irrelevant

second of all THIS IS NOT ABOUT ME
THIS GROUP CHAT IS ABOUT NEIL

Knoxious *has changed the group chat name to* ***Neil is the only person here with even the slightest chance of getting requited love right now, don't fuck it up***

Neil Perry

,,,well

I have to go to my stupid

biology lecture :(

Seriously though

send help

im gonna die

That Dipshit Nuwanda

These were AMAZING ideas

Knoxious

We're just geniuses not appreciated in our own time, Wanda

Smartass Ginger ™

Bye Neil!

Smartass Ginger™** has changed the group chat name to **The Neil Perry Support Group

Todd needs to get a book for class. Neil isn't feeling particularly well, his Dad's words have stuck with him, but it's a Saturday. Everyone is doing their own thing and he and Todd haven't just— done something together in a while, so Neil comes with him.

There's a little used bookshop on the edge of campus. Neil has only been there a handful of times in the summer; either when he hung out with Todd or got bored from lack of human contact in the empty dorms. As soon as they walk in, Todd's eyes light up. The walls are lined from floor to ceiling with shelves, room after room like that; there's an entire room of the maze-ish bookstore that's devoted to poetry books.

Todd had told Neil once that he wasn't into writing or reading before he moved to the poet's high school. Their English teacher, Mr. Keating changed that for him.

"Then what'd you do?" Neil had asked Todd the time they had talked about it.

"What do you mean?"

"I swear to god, most of what I see you doing is writing or reading," Neil said, picking up the copy of The Catcher in The Rye that Todd had in front of him, and opening the book to inspect it. Neil had read it Junior year and never liked it much. "What did you do before you had poetry? How did you fill your time?"

Todd had to think about it for a moment. "Nothing I enjoyed. My parents weren't very uh— focused on trying to get me involved in things. Mostly I-I just tried whatever Jeffery did, and would fail miserably."

"Like what?" Neil sets Todd's book back in front of him.

"Oh God. Everything. You know Jeffery; he's good at anything he tries. I tried the math team and robotics and coding and track and debate. Debate team lasted less than a week though; when they realized I couldn't talk in front of people, let alone argue, I got kicked off immediately. Which I was fine with."

Todd paused a moment before going on, "I even— I even tried acting once."

"Really?" Neil asked excitedly, eyebrows raised. It was last May, and although Todd had helped Neil memorize his lines the previous fall, Neil had never seen him actually act. Especially not in front of people.

"Yeah. It was awful."

Neil grinned. "I would pay exactly ten billion dollars to see you act."

Todd seemed to go shy and cracked back open The Catcher in The Rye, eyes immediately dropping back to the print. “Well—you can keep your money.”

But Keating had changed that. Neil has seen Todd write for hours—sometimes days— on end; Neil isn’t a bad writer, it just doesn’t click together in his brain the way it does in Todd’s. Todd can cough out stunning metaphors in an instant and bleed out poetry without consequence. Everything Neil writes is a bit choppy and tastes wrong in his mouth; he has never understood how Todd can just make the words work . He supposes they’re just different breeds of creative.

It was the same thing with reading; after senior year, it wasn’t just books of poetry that Todd breathed in; it was any piece of literature he could get his shaky hands on. Todd isn’t a particularly fast reader but he dissects and makes perfect sense of everything he reads.

Presently, Todd goes to get whatever his literature teacher requested and Neil just hovers around a section full of notebooks.

There’s one other thing as well. One other reason why Neil came today.

Todd’s birthday. Todd is turning nineteen in two weeks; Neil knows he’s never had a proper celebration for his birthday, and he and the poets want to plan something good. But, even before that, Neil needs to find something to give Todd. He knows Todd is one who isn’t going to be picky about gifts as he’s rarely gotten any (let alone gifts he likes). But Neil needs to find him the right thing.

Neil may know Todd Anderson like the back of his hand, but has absolutely no clue what the perfect thing is.

“Hey— I found it.”

Neil looks up and Todd is already back, holding a red and tan novel. He can see something in Todd’s face; some sort of excitement that only something like a quiet bookstore can inspire.

“Do you want to look around?” Neil asks.

Todd nods and grins. They’ve been to bookstores a few times this past summer, when Todd was allowed to leave the house. (That was one of the strange things about Todd’s parents; they didn't let him leave often, even though when he was there Todd was something of a ghost to them.) Maybe it’s the low volume or maybe the fact that they’re

surrounded by the things that make Todd calm— words— but whenever they go to bookstores, Todd always looks so relaxed.

Relaxed is rarely a word that describes Todd. It makes Neil smile as he watches Todd make his way back to the poetry section.

“Wait, Todd—“ Neil says, following Todd down the aisle. When he reaches the poetry room, Todd already has a book in his hands. There’s sunlight from a soon to set sun streaming from a small window, and it catches Todd just perfectly so that his eyes sparkle slightly and there’s a little halo of light around his profile.

“Mmm?” Todd hums.

“I want to do something first,” Neil says.

Todd looks up from a red leather volume of Christ knows what that he’s already pulled off a shelf. He pulls this look, half smile, half concern. “What’s that?”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” Neil says, grinning back.

“Like what?”

“Stop looking like I’m about to tell you that you’re going to help me commit a murder or something.”

“Okay, okay,” Todd replies, still looking slightly worried. But he places the book down on the shelf where it belongs and looks at Neil expectantly.

“Com’on Todd. Trust me.” Neil holds out a hand and Todd takes it.

“Okay,” Todd says. His voice is much softer.

They started doing this thing the first time they went to the bookstore where they each chose a book for each other. But after that first day, the rules changed every time; last time they had to choose a book for each other but the title had to have a T, an A, and an E in the title. (Todd technically won with Hamlet, but Neil joked with him that it was *too* predictable.)

“We’re going to do it differently this time,” Neil says.

“How so?”

“We’re going to find the worst possible books for each other.”

Todd grins. “How many minutes do we get? Ten, like usual?”

“Ten. Like usual,” Neil confirms. “Meet back here?”

They put a timer on Neil’s phone, and then head their separate ways. Todd makes an immediate beeline toward the back like he knows exactly what he’s looking for and Neil looks around, having absolutely no clue where to start. He feels like he’s at an immediate disadvantage; bookstores are Todd’s home turf.

Neil ends up nearly running out the clock and knows that whatever Todd gets him will be far better. He’s right; Todd goes second.

“What’d you get me?” Neil asks, looking more closely at the book Todd gave him. The cover is a deep pink but there’s no picture; it’s pretty plain.

Todd turns red but he’s grinning. Neil opens it, and reads a random paragraph.

“Todd Anderson?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you get me— erotica?”

“No, I—“ Todd says, quietly and shyly but all while holding back a laugh. “I got you *straight* erotica.”

Neil breaks into a loud, uncontainable laugh; the kind that makes even the most stoic people lighten up. Todd’s grinning wildly but not looking up from his toes. This always makes Neil feel slightly bad; Todd is always so clever but he’s always too shy and anxious to let himself enjoy the result of his humor. But then he sees that Todd’s laughing too.

”Hey, Todd, look at me—“ Neil says, still laughing slightly. Todd does, barley, so Neil puts a hand on his shoulder as he ducks a bit to catch Todd’s eyes.

”You’re brilliant,” Neil says, grinning before growing a bit more serious. When people meet Todd, they always try to simplify him; a shy and anxious writer. Todd is really so much more than that. He’s clever, funny and brave; Todd Anderson has so much more life in him than anybody gives him credit for. “You know that?”

Todd smiles. He's everything Neil is afraid to let himself want.

"And you're funny— you probably already know that but I want you to hear me say it."

Todd may not *need* the verbal confirmation, but Neil knows how much being told you're good at something can add confidence. And Jesus Christ does Todd need the confidence he so badly deserves.

"I know," Todd says, voice low, even though he probably doesn't.

"You win. Easily."

Neil can't help himself in that moment and he leans forward, starting to laugh again, and pushes that dumb peice of hair out of Todd's face.

After that, they just wander. Before Neil knows it, he's standing by Todd as Todd sits on the floor and looks through the bottom shelf of one of the multitude of bookshelves. Neil would be looking too but his arms are full of books; Todd's books. He doesn't understand exactly what Todd's system is for choosing books that he likes but every few minutes he'll pull one off the shelf, read a few pages, and then either put it back on the shelf (always in the correct place) or set it in Neil's arms.

The thing is that Neil doesn't mind, he never minds; most of the books he reads are one's Todd lends him anyway. Neil doesn't read many fiction books, mostly just plays and poetry, but when Todd is telling him about his current read and Neil thinks that it sounds interesting, Todd always lets him borrow it. Todd also annotates every book he reads, so Neil always appreciates the little thoughts crammed in the margins.

Plus, even if Neil did want to look around on his own, how is Neil supposed to be able to interrupt Todd? He's got this cute, slightly concentrated, mostly impressed expression that he only gets around language And who is Neil to pull Todd out of his zone?

It's only when Todd tries to put book number sixteen into Neil's arms that Neil caves and pulls Todd back to the mortal world.

"Todd, I don't mind holding these, but if you give me any more books I'm going to drop all of them; I physically do not have enough square footage of arm area to carry any more."

"Oh, shit, sorry! I didn't even notice I was handing them to you—I

was kind of caught up in— my head."

Todd tries to grab a few from Neil, but there's so many that in the transaction, Neil ends up dumping about half of them on the floor. Todd's foot taps and his hands tremble slightly from embarrassment — they're making quite a spectacle of themselves— but Neil thinks the clumsiness of them together is quite funny. Before they pick up the books, Neil steadies Todd's shaking self with a careful hand.

"Here, Todd— look through them whichever ones you don't want, I'll put back, yeah?"

Todd starts to go through them, and once he's narrowed it down to about six, Neil starts to put back the others.

When Neil comes back, Todd has his pile of six, and then another huge stack sitting next to him.

"What are those ones?" Neil asks.

Todd bites his lip. "They're the new ones I'm getting."

He's got to have at least fourteen new ones.

"That's—that's *too many* books," Neil says.

Todd looks at his pile, considering for a moment. He seems to come to some sort of conclusion and pats the pile sadly, as though he will greatly mourn the parting. "But— *books* ."

The woeful look on Todd's face when he looks up at Neil nearly makes Neil not only let him get all the books, but consider buying them for Todd with his own non-existent money. But Neil needs to not be anymore stupid over Todd than his smitten heart already is.

"No, Todd, you've got to put some back."

Todd's normally the voice of reason; or the one of worry to the point that he would knock the bad plans the poets made (often Charlie's idea and lead by Neil) down a notch. But apparently Todd's love of books is one of the few things that can make him irrational. His weak spot.

Todd ends up narrowing it down to six again, and Neil puts a hand on Todd's arm before he insists on carrying the books for Todd. Todd's skin is soft. Neil definitely doesn't think about what it would be like to

touch Todd's face, to run light fingers over his feature and against his lips and through his hair. Because that would be weird, right?

Neil looks to Todd on their way to the front of the store. "I'd just like to have like some room to exist in our dorm— at this rate, in a month we're not going to have beds anymore, just a fuck ton of bookshelfs."

Todd laughs and it's this beautiful sound that makes Neil want to kiss Todd so badly that ignoring the impulse physically hurts. In the toughest parts of Neil's bones.

Neil hands the books to Todd once they get closer to the checkout desk. "What are you up to tonight?"

Todd shrugs. Neil doesn't hesitate.

"Want to get dinner? We can go sit outside at that little cafe down the street since this is probably our last not terribly freezing day of the year. We can read poetry from your new books too, if you'd like."

Todd looks at Neil for a long moment and his face cracks open in a smile.

"You are the perfect man," Todd says, then after a moment seems to realize what he said and blushes for the thousandth time today; Todd is to blushing as Charlie is to smirking. After a moment of just looking at Neil awkwardly, he turns away to go pay, looking so ridiculously excited about his seventy five billion new books. Todd *needs* to stop being that goddamn gorgeous.

You are the perfect man. Jesus, Neil wishes he was.

For The Best

Chapter Summary

in which EVERYONE is angsty for some reason or another but hey, at least we finally meet pitts in this chapter

Chapter Notes

today's mood; just watching all the parts of dps that todd is in so i can see which words he tends to stutter on. (spoiler: the main one is literally just 'I')
i really hope you keep reading until the end; i'm really excited about were this all is headed, and you all keep me inspired!
please remember to leave kudos! all comments are greatly appreciated :)
forever writing,
auxctor

The door bangs open with an intense force that causes both Neil and Todd to jump. Todd accidentally drops the neon pink highlighter that he's using on his class notes and sends it skidding across the floor. Charlie is smirking at them from the doorway.

"Christ, Dalton, when the hell are you going to learn how to knock? You always scare the shit out of us when you do that," Neil says. He's on the end of Todd's bed and Todd is at the head, today's schoolwork spread out between them.

"Everyone has their pants on, I don't need to knock," Charlie says.

"I think it's just—general protocol."

Charlie ignores Neil and looks at Todd, pointing a determined finger in his direction. "Todd, my boy! "

"Yes Nuwanda?" Todd asks, still breathing heavily from the scare but smiling in spite of that. Charlie comes to sit on Todd's bed, between Neil and Todd, crushing part of Neil's statistics work.

"I'm kidnapping you." Charlie says. "You. Me. The coffee shop on fifth."

Todd laughs in his quiet way. "Yeah, sure. Now?"

“Yes, you need a break. You’ve been studying hard and you need a break.”

“I’ve been studying too!” Neil says, because even though he knows he’s not invited and is completely okay with that, he’s legally obligated to give Charlie a hard time.

“I know, and we couldn’t be more proud of you darling.” Charlie pats Neil on the cheek in this stupid, endearing way. Todd packs up his work, and then visibly checks to make sure he has his wallet.

Neil laughs; he always loves when Charlie takes Todd to go do things. He loves seeing them having a good time, and Charlie is the only person in the world who can convince Todd to leave the quiet dorm more quickly than Neil.

Charlie is Neil’s best friend. Him and Todd are different types of best friends to Neil. Todd is the kind of best friend who you fall in love with; Charlie is the type of best friend who has been there as long as Neil can remember and will continue to be here for as long as he can imagine.

Neil grins.“Have fun! I guess I’ll get back to my super fun statistics.”

“That’s my boy!” Charlie says, but he’s already halfway out the door, Todd behind him.

“You sound like a grandpa saying that!” Neil shouts after him.

Todd stops in the doorway quickly. “See you later?”

“Of course.”

Todd smiles and shuts the door behind him.

Neil and Charlie always go downtown and to concerts and to places that are as lively and loud as them. Charlie always takes Todd to coffee shops and restaurants; Neil isn’t quite sure how someone as boisterous as Charlie doesn’t get kicked out of coffee shops more often, his voice always carries, but Charlie does try to lower his voice slightly around Todd.

Neil studies for a while, but he eventually ends up going to Cameron’s dorm due to his confusion on statistics (and lets be real, Neil does so much prefer hanging out with the poets to being alone at pretty much every non-depressed moment of his life). Meeks may not be here with

his unending intelligence but Cameron is the next best thing. Cameron is actually a pretty good teacher, even if he does get kind of condescending sometimes; Meeks is smart, but he's the kind of smart that makes him so brilliant so that, although he's great at doing all work, he's kind of a shitty teacher because he doesn't know how to explain concepts. Everything just clicks for Meeks.

When Neil gets to Cameron's dorm, Knox is already there asking about physics.

The next week is fine. After the bookstore on Saturday, Neil had been buzzed on things Todd makes him feel, but as the week comes around the high fades. Work piles on, all of the poets are stressed about their courses, and Neil has started feeling constantly anxious. Every time anyone's phone rings, Neil flinches. The poets are hoping to fit another meeting soon, as they've only had one since the school year started and it's already cold outside, but planning is difficult.

But things aren't bad. They're fine.

When Neil gets back to the dorm, he's expecting it to be empty; Todd should be at class. But when he comes in, Todd's already there.

It takes Neil a minute to even notice him; Todd is on the floor, knees up to his chest and his face mostly buried in his arms, leaning up against the foot of his bed frame. His breathing is heavy and labored. He doesn't look up even though he surely hears Neil come in.

"Todd, are you okay?"

Todd nods in response but Neil can just barely see that his eyes are pressed closed hard, ridiculously hard, like he's trying to concentrate on blocking out noise or attempting not to cry. Maybe both.

"What's wrong?" Neil asks, coming to sit next to Todd but keeping his distance; by the time he asks the question he already knows the answer.

Todd just takes a shaky breath and puts a hand against his chest like he can press his lungs into functioning again, He pulls his face from his knees and looks at Neil for a moment; there are already tears in his eyes.

“Todd, hey—“ Neil says quietly. “Is this one of the ones where you need me to go?”

Todd shakes his head. He folds back into himself, breathing getting quicker and more and more sporadic and Neil knows he came just in time; it’s going to get much worse before it gets better.

The anxiety attacks always start like this.

“It’s going to be okay.”

Neil takes Todd’s hand and squeezes as tight as he can; the time Neil talked to his therapist how to help Todd through anxiety attacks, she said that grounding him should help. It did help the past few times it happened. But Neil can already tell this isn’t one of his somewhat regular anxiety attacks; this is a full blown panic attack.

Todd squeezes Neil’s hand back.

“How can I help?” Neil tries.

Todd looks miserable and his voice shakes instead of stuttering. He’s clearly having trouble catching his breath. “I don’t know— ‘m sorry.”

“Todd, you’re okay. You’re safe. It’s just our dorm; It’s just me,” Neil reassures him.“Try and breathe.”

“I can’t.”

“I need you to just *try* to breathe—“

“I can’t—Neil—I fucking—I can’t—“

Todd’s fully crying. Todd doesn’t cry too often; Neil’s always been more of a crier than Todd, but these are always different. “I can’t—”

“Yes you can,” Neil says. Todd’s palms are sweaty and Neil wants to help. He wants to help but he doesn’t know how; this clearly isn’t working and every panic attack of Todd’s is different and he doesn’t know what the hell to do. *Let me suffocate* Neil thinks, *let me take this instead. Todd doesn’t deserve this* .

“I know— I know *I* can. My body— my thoughts— I can’t—“

“Okay, okay, that’s okay,” Neil says. “We’ll focus on something else.”

Todd’s breath is faster and faster, halfway between average and

hyperventilation, and Neil puts his free hand on Todd's knee.

"Do you want me closer?"

Sometimes when Todd has panic attacks, Neil holding him helps. Sometimes it makes the whole thing worse.

"I—I don't know. 'M sorry. 'M sorry."

Todd's back to pressing his forehead against his knees, arms wrapped around his legs, but now one hand is in Neil's.

"It's okay not to know—"

"I-I-I'm so fucking sorry—" Todd says and Neil knows what he means. Todd has always felt like he's putting this huge burden on Neil, but Neil wants him to know it's his pleasure to support Todd.

"No. No, Todd, you don't need to say sorry. I'm here for you and I want to be; you're okay," Neil says. At some point he's able to coax Todd to his feet so they can go sit on Neil's bed instead of spending the rest of the evening on the hardwood floor. Once they get settled there, Neil tries what he always tries if nothing has worked by now; he just talks. He tries to spill out something sweet so that his words will take this sour taste out of Todd's mouth.

"If you want me to be quiet, tell me, yeah?

Todd's eyes have crushed shut again but he nods.

Neil tries to think of any good, safe memories in any good, safe place.

And he does. He talks to Todd about all the adventures The Poets went on last year, and all the days in Keating's class. Neil goes on about poetry and their trips to the bookstore, about all the brights part of last year. About these past few months. He tells Todd how excited he was to be roommates. He says any honest thing he can that he knows will help Todd catch a breath.

Todd's certainly calmer, but not as much as Neil had hoped. Neil's at a bit of loss.

Sometimes the best thing Neil can do is just be there. So he holds Todd's hands in his, whispering little affirmations that he means but probably make no difference. He does what he can until Todd calms.

They're there for a few hours at least; even when the panic ends, Todd

is still something shattered. Soon enough, Todd caves into Neil and Neil holds him. They're both sitting next to each other on Neil's bed, but Todd is now leaning into Neil and Neil has an arm around him. He just wants Todd to feel secure.

After a while, Neil thinks some food might be good, or water or *something* as Todd probably hasn't eaten since breakfast. He shifts slightly, extracting Todd from where he's leaning into Neil's side.

"Todd, I'll be right—"

"Please don't go." Todd's grip on Neil's wrist gets tighter, like Neil is the only thing keeping him from collapsing. Neil might be.

"Okay, okay," Neil turns to look at him, pulling back so he can look Todd in the eyes and hold both Todd's hands firmly in his. "Todd, I'm not going; I promise."

"Please don't leave me."

Neil nods; he of all people knows that being left to your own thoughts is a terrifying thing. Todd is finally calm enough that he can focus properly on breathing, and so that's what they do for the next half an hour.

"In for four, hold for five—" Neil reminds him, tapping the four beats on Todd's palm with his middle and pointer fingers.

In for four, hold for five. Out for six, hold for five. Again and again and again.

The room is still quiet except for Todd's still slightly shaky but full breaths.

"Do you need to talk about it?" Neil whispers. He looks down at Todd; at some point after Neil stopped counting, he and Todd ended up laying down in Neil's bed, Todd's forehead against Neil's chest.

Todd is quiet for a while and Neil worries that it's one of the times that talking about the cause of his panic attack will make it bad again. But then Todd speaks.

"It feels stupid— " Todd's voice is muffled and warped in Neil's sweatshirt.

“It’s never stupid. Never.”

Todd takes a breath. It’s barley labored anymore. “So today…”

“Yeah?”

“I had to give an oral presentation in class today—it was not good,” Todd says. “I think that’s what triggered it, anyway. Things have been a lot and—I don’t know. I haven’t felt well. And then everything got really bad really quickly and I-I walked out of class halfway through my presentation; I’m going to try to email my professor but they aren’t usually very understanding.”

Neil hadn’t known Todd had a presentation coming up and he wishes Todd had told him because he could have done something to help, but he doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t want to make this all any harder for Todd.

“I’m sorry things are hard right now. Is the anxiety getting worse?”

“A bit—I don’t know. I-I just always feel ridiculous and pathetic when I—when I break down like that. I’m eighteen, Neil, almost nineteen and I— should be able to handle regular life without crying like a kid and forgetting how to breathe. I’m eighteen and I should be able to take care of myself, I should be able to—”

“Todd, sweetheart, slow down—“ Neil says, then pauses abruptly when he realizes how he let love slip out, but Todd has no reaction so he just plows on. “You’re not pathetic. You’re not. This is just how you work and that’s okay— your brain does this sometimes and that’s okay.”

“It doesn’t bother you?”

Neil is taken aback. “Of course it doesn’t bother me. I mean, I hate to see you not okay but I’m here for you. And I don’t mind being here for you.”

Todd looks up at him briefly. “You sure?”

“Positive. I think you’re forgetting that my brain doesn’t work right either.” Neil gives Todd a small smile and Todd smiles weakly back before he looks away to lean his forehead against Neil’s chest again.

“I just don’t want you to pity me,” Todd says quietly.

“I will *never* pity you.”

After that, they’re both quiet for a long time.

“Thank you,” Todd says quietly, long after it’s gone dark.

“It’s nothing.”

Only a few minutes later, Todd falls asleep. Neil doesn’t move.

Sometime in the early hours of the morning, early enough that it’s still dark out, Neil is awoken by a loud buzz from his phone. Still half asleep, it takes him a while to find where his phone is in the mix of blanket and sheet, especially when trying not to wake a half tangled-with-him Todd.

When Neil does find his phone, he opens his messages.

There’s one from his mother.

I heard your father got angry with you the other day, dear

Just remember that he loves you very much.

This pang like a gong ringing much to high reverberates through him. Why text Neil? Why is she texting him this early? Why text Neil now, when he’s resting peacefully with a quiet boy in his bed, calm for the first time in a while? The message triggers something in Neil’s brain.

Neil loses hold of his thoughts very quickly. His father *loves him very much* . Neil’s father may be wrong, but now that Neil thinks about it, maybe his intentions are good? Maybe that’s what his mother means; maybe he cuts Neil apart to turn him into a better man? Neil looks over at Todd who's still completely asleep.

The thing Neil feels for Todd doesn’t sting like this.

Todd is the least likely person in the world to hurt Neil. Even if he were to let him down, he would do it gently.

But there’s something to this; Neil doesn’t ache around Todd. His chest doesn’t feel like knives are carving emotions into stubborn skin. He does feel something for Todd but it’s not brutal enough; should Neil be allowed to feel this softness?

Like his father told him on the phone the other day, what he's been telling Neil for years, is that Neil has a lot of work to do to become a person worth being proud of. Nobody loves a man who is stuck in this foolish phase of being an actor; nobody can love someone who doesn't have a real job or who hasn't taken every opportunity he's been offered.

Even if Todd feels something for Neil, he could never truly *love* someone like Neil. Neil isn't the picture of success; he will never be enough for sweet beautiful talented Todd.

The doubt creeps in, quick and crippling.

How can these things he feel for Todd be real love? How could this be love if it doesn't hurt? Neil looks at Todd where he's curved into Neil's side like a comma that keeps some beautiful poem going somewhere. Todd calmed down a long time ago and his breath is even with sleep.

But Neil can't find the joy that Todd should bring. It's gone somewhere, disappeared the moment Neil's phone lit up the safe darkness of their dorm, and Neil feels his chest tighten at this beautiful boy in his bed that he loves completely but probably shouldn't.

Neil's father has called his love dirty. His father has called Neil's love sacrilegious and disgusting and unclean. Loving boys is not something his father's son would do. Being in love with Todd is not something Neil Perry should do, is it? Neil's father has said his love is revolting. And for the first time in a very long time, Neil worries that he might be right.

Neil shakes Todd gently awake. It's ridiculous hours in the morning, but Todd won't know that.

"Todd. Todd."

"Hmmm?" Todd responds sleepily.

"Hey, sorry to wake you but I have some homework to do— do you mind moving back to your bed?"

Even in his half-asleep state, there's confusion and maybe something akin to sadness in Todd's eyes. Neil tells himself he's seeing things. Todd's got pretty, blue as bliss eyes but thinking that's probably cheesy and stupid; Neil feels like a dumbass.

“Oh—oh yeah. Okay.” Todd pulls himself sluggishly to his feet and goes to curl up in his own bed. Neil waits until Todd’s breathing settles back into a steady sleep before getting up and dragging his own comforter to Todd’s side of the room, and put it over Todd; their room is chilly from an in-reach winter. And this stupid blanket is all Neil can offer Todd right now.

Neil goes back to lay in his own bed, cold without his comforter, but he doesn’t take it back. He just stares at the ceiling. This is for the best; Neil doesn’t want to be an unclean thing and more than that, he doesn’t want to get so intimate that Todd could see what a mess he really is. From this distance, Neil should still look uncracked and clean. Why had he ever thought telling Todd he loved him was a good idea?

Neil tries not to notice that his pillow smells like Todd. He doesn’t do any homework.

“Where’s Meeks? I thought he was going to be here at four,” Cameron asks.

“Oh shut up Dick,” Charlie answers, sending a rich scowl in Cameron’s direction. They’re both edgy today; Cameron’s been overworking himself and looks like he hasn’t slept properly in the last week. Charlie is pissy because he bombed one of the most important tests for this semester in his Writing and Rhetoric course. Charlie can write and dissect poetry, they all can, (Neil is probably the lousiest writer of them all) so the degree to which he screwed himself is concerning. Neil looks at Charlie and the way his jaw is clenched; something much bigger is wrong.

Cameron snaps back at Charlie. “I wasn’t complaining! I just have homework to do and I was wondering if I had time to--”

He’s interrupted by a knock on the open door and there is Meeks, smiling widely.

“Meeks!” Charlie says, face immediately slacking back to his normal enthusiasm.

“Hey guys,” Meeks says, smiling tiredly and Neil can see the pressure of Harvard in the barely noticeable bags under his eyes. Jesus Christ, Neil hates to see all his poets like this.

It takes a moment for them to notice the beanstalk-y guy with a terrible flattop haircut behind Meeks. Meeks seems to realize he failed to introduce everyone to the newest poet.

“This is Gerard Pitts.”

Gerard smiles awkwardly, going around to shake hands; he comes to Neil first. “Just Pitts is alright.”

Neil introduces everyone and talks briefly before he notices that they’re one poet short.

“Wait—where’s Knox? Isn’t he coming?” Neil asks, question general but addressed to Charlie more than anyone else.

As though on cue, Knox comes in at a walk so fast it may be considered a jog; he almost slams straight into Meeks’ back.

“Oh, shit, sorry!” Knox says, shaking his head as if to jumble his thoughts back into the correct order. “I was trying to get here as fast as I could, I was doing classwork at the library, lost track of time—“

Neil watches Charlie’s features tighten briefly, something like upset; the only other person who seems to notice is Knox. Knox meets Charlie’s eyes, only flicking away for a moment before he mouths a small *don’t* to Charlie.

What? Charlie mouths back.

Knox sends a pointed look his way. *Later.*

Everyone else is caught up in conversation, Neil included, but Neil notices this kind of thing. No one else does. Not even Todd; even though he’s not talking, he’s listening intently to everyone speaking. Knox looks briefly over at his own bed and instead goes to sit next to Charlie, and Charlie’s expression looks much too tight.

Something’s up.

“Wait, so Steven, is this your boyfriend?” Charlie asks, looking away from Knox and motioning toward Pitts.

Meeks laughs. “Nuwanda— aromanticism, remember?”

“Right, right,” Charlie says.

“And please don’t call me Steven.”

“Why not?”

Meeks raises his eyebrows. “What kind of sorry bastard would I be if I went by Steven?”

“What’s so bad about it?” Neil laughs, leaning back against the wall. He’s next to Todd in their now regular spot; on the floor between Knox and Charlie’s headboards.

“Steven makes me sound like someone’s republican step dad,” Meeks says.

Charlie laughs properly at that.

“Yeah, not going to lie, it kind of does,” Neil agrees.

“Gerard is worse,” Pitts says. Meeks sits in his usual chair and Pitts looks around awkwardly, as though he’s unsure where he’s allowed to sit.

“You can sit on my bed,” Knox says, motioning generally in the direction of his bed. Pitts nods gratefully and sits at the foot of Knox’s bed so that he’s closest to Meeks out of anyone.

“And,” Meeks starts, returning to the conversation at hand. “No, Gerard is not worse than Steven— you have Gerard Way.”

Cameron pipes up from the corner. “Nope, I win with Richard. I swear, if I get called Dick one more time—“

“Maybe if you weren’t such a dick I wouldn’t feel the need to,” Charlie says loudly. He seems much more normal now, probably pushing it down like usual, and Neil puts a pin in his concern for later. What would he even do about it right now?

Charlie looks over at Neil. “Well, Perry?”

“Yes?”

“Poetry?” Charlie smiles. Neil grins back.

“Poetry,” Neil confirms. He takes a deep breath as he opens the book that they’ve been reading out of since their very first meeting junior year; he actually brought it today. He tries to forget about everything; the fact that his boys are stressed, that something’s wrong with Charlie, that his father could figure out he’s not at Harvard any day now. Neil pushes out thoughts of the warm blond boy next to him,

and the fact that he loves him. He tries to ignore a new voice in his head, the one that's telling him that maybe he shouldn't love Todd at all, and gets lost in the poetry.

Something Personal

Chapter Summary

oh lordy this fic just keeps getting gayer and more chaotic

Chapter Notes

This chapter did not go at all how I planned and I kinda just— changed the course of the entire fic? So there's that. I really hope you enjoy; I'm sorry but not sorry about the ending of this chapter.
In all honesty, I had too much fun writing it lmao! It's one of my faves thus far.
forever writing,
auxctor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The meeting makes Neil's heart feel lighter where it had eroded ever-so-slightly in his chest.

"No! You shut the fuck up right now!" Charlie shouts loudly. Everyone's laughing at his histrionics; well, everyone except for—

Cameron attempts to defend himself before Charlie interrupts again."I'm just saying—"

"No Cameron! You're wrong. Your opinion is wrong. Incorrect. Invalid. Erroneous."

"Oooh— erroneous, good word," Neil says in a tone that probably makes the comment come off a lot more sexual than intended.

"How the hell do you interpret poetry incorrectly?" Cameron asks."Isn't that the point? Poetry is subjective."

"Yes, true," Charlie says. "But your interpretation is still wrong; you're always wrong."

"I was just arguing the same point and you didn't say anything," Knox points out, also laughing.

"Well it sounds stupid when Cameron says it."

“Charlie!” Cameron says loudly; maybe they should drink at every poets meeting for the sole purpose of bringing Cameron down a few pegs. He’s high strung, but in a different manner than Todd; Todd is the worrying kind of high strung, while Cameron is the stick-up-his-ass kind of high strung. *Maybe high maintenance is a better way to describe Cameron,* Neil thinks

“Nuwanda,” Charlie corrects.

Cameron looks around helplessly, hoping someone will back him up, but everyone is laughing too hard to be anything close to useful; Charlie and Cameron have been arguing for the last half an hour and Charlie has this way of making everything about ten times funnier than it should be.

“Okay, come on Nuwanda—play nice,” Neil says once he catches his breath.

“Not my fault he’s a dumb bitch,” Charlie says, putting his hands in the air defensively.

Knox is laughing but he raises his eyebrows at Charlie. “Nuwanda—”

“Ugggh fine— sorry Cameron,” Charlie says, voice heavy with sarcasm. Even though it’s clearly a joke of an apology, it catches Neil by surprise; Charlie Dalton does not *apologise* . Especially to Cameron. Charlie is 100% unapologetic about everything he does.

Todd seems to be the only other person that catches it, because they both look at eachother. Neil raises his eyebrows as if to ask *what the* hell *is up with Charlie* ? Everything about him just seems— off tonight.

No clue Todd mouths back.

Neil feels himself smile at the fact that Todd gets him. Charlie continues to voice his poetry opinions loudly and Knox keeps the meeting somewhat on track; Neil is too busy contributing to Charlie’s chaos to keep things under control. The poets laugh and talk until the sun goes down and Neil’s heart is so so steady.

“Hey Neil, can I talk to you?”

It’s the end of the meeting and Meeks and Pitts have apparently

decided to make the drive back tonight; Lord knows why. Neil is surprised to find that, out of all people, it's Meeks who's asking to talk.

Neil nods. "Yeah sure."

He follows Meeks out into the hall.

"What's up?" Neil asks as they start down the stairs, taking the lead. Meeks doesn't answer until they reach Neil and Todd's room; when they get in, Neil raises his eyebrows expectantly.

"I just wanted to ask if you're okay."

Neil's taken aback. "Oh, yeah. Why?"

"Your text the other day; what happened?"

Neil had almost forgotten the fact that he never explained to Meeks why he needed his room number. "Oh. Right."

"What's going on?" Meeks asks. "Do you need to talk?"

Before Neil can stop, he's spilling the story out; it's been stressful keeping up this lie with no one to lean on. Meeks listens intently, having no obvious reaction; that's one thing Neil likes about talking to Meeks; he's always level-headed. He's never judgey about the other poet's stupid descisions. (Such as a decision to lie to an abusive fuck of a father.)

"Well—" Meeks says, after Neil has finished filling him in on the friction with his father. "I haven't gotten books from your mom yet, but I'll tell you when I do."

"I don't care about the books."

"I know. So, just to clarify— you told your dad that you got into Harvard, and that you're a health science major?"

"Yep, basically." Neil feels the dread he's been trying so hard to keep below the surface snaking up into his chest.

Meeks lets out a long breath. "Oh boy."

"Exactly."

Meeks thinks for a moment.

“Neil, you’re eighteen. You do realize you don’t have to stay in contact —,” he starts.

Neil knew that anyone he told about this would bring that up. “But I do.”

“Why?”

“You know how my Dad gets. I’m scared of what he’ll do if I come clean, or if I try to cut him off—thinking about it makes me actually nauseous,” Neil says. “And it’s not just that...”

“What is it?”

“So I got a small scholarship for school, right? But the rest of tuition and housing and everything else I’m paying myself.”

Meeks nods to show he’s still listening and Neil goes on.

“I worked junior year and senior year— until,y’know, my brain went to shit —because I needed to have this money for college. But my dad, he has access to all my money.”

Meeks just looks at Neil. “What do you mean?”

“What I mean is—I don’t have a bank account. All my money’s in his account, all the money I earned for over a year. My dad doesn’t think that I can— handle that responsibility. So I get a monthly allowance —”

“Of your own money?”

“Of my own money. And so if I cut him off— Meeks, I would have literally nothing. And sure, I can do school on loans. But everything else— I don’t know what I’d do.”

“Damn,” Meeks says. Neil nods before going on.

“I was going to work a job this year but I knew it was useless, unless I wanted to hide the money from my Dad and— I’m already anxious enough just hiding this from him. So— if I want to keep living in the world, I have to stay in contact with him. Plus, as I said, my Dad’s a loose canon— Lord knows what would happen if I just stopped talking to him.”

“Well—” Meeks says, seeming like he’s trying to step lightly. “I don’t have a great answer for you, I’m sorry. And I know even if I did, you

wouldn't want me to do anything so— if you need to talk, I'm here for you Neil. You can keep using my room address if you need it again."

Neil lets out a sigh of relief; he's glad that Meeks gets that Neil doesn't want help fixing it. "Thank you Meeks, that means a lot."

"I mean— we're all here for you, you know that, right?"

Neil nods. Meeks thinks for a moment, seeming to hesitate over what he's about to ask.

"Neil, don't get me wrong, I'm really glad you're talking to me about this. But, out of curiosity— why are you talking to me out of anyone?"

You're at Harvard is Neil's first thought, but he knows there's more to it then that. He didn't have to tell Meeks any of this he didn't want to.

"Well, you're sensible."

"Well—yes," Meeks grins before going serious again. "But so is Todd. And Cameron can be. And even though Charlie isn't too sensible, you guys have been friends forever; he'd help in his own Charlie way."

"Cameron wouldn't be at all understanding," Neil says, pausing before going on. "And Charlie has been my best friend for ages, but I know he would— be clueless about what to say."

Meeks raises his eyebrows. "And Todd?"

"And Todd," Neil says, crossing his arms in this protective way. "I don't know. He would make a big deal out of it and I just— I can't with Todd right now."

Meeks raises his eyebrows. "Did something happen between you two? Because you haven't told him yet so I've been wondering—"

"No, no, nothing like that. Just Todd's so stressed right now, you know how he gets so tightly wound— and I'm not just going to dump this on him."

"Neil he would be happy—"

"No, I can't. I just can't.I just don't want to tell him what a dumbass I'm being, lying to my dad and I don't want him to have to deal with this shit."

"He'll—"

“Can we please drop this now?” Neil says, getting suddenly defensive. It doesn’t come out snappish though— it comes out like a plea. The words leave Neil’s mouth like he’s asking for forgiveness, but he’s not quite sure what for.

Meeks takes a deep breath. “Yeah, sure.”

Neil gets a little quieter; his chest hurts with the weight of it all. “I love Todd. I want him to be peaceful for once in his goddamn life.”

He hopes that’s explanation enough. Meeks seems to get it.

“And there’s one other reason—“ Neil starts. “But you have to swear you won’t try to argue it.”

“Go for it— I won’t,” Meeks says, leaning against Todd’s desk.

“Charlie, Todd, and Cameron all come from families with money, and —“

Meeks understands before Neil finishes. “You don’t want handouts.”

“Exactly. And I don’t know if Cameron would try to give me money but,” Neil sighs. “I know Charlie would and I think Todd probably would. And I know they both just want to help but—I can’t let them do that.”

Meeks is going to school entirely on scholarships, that’s the only way he could swing Harvard, and he’s the only other poet that seems to get why this kind of thing bothers Neil. They seem to come to a silent understanding that this conversation’s over because they both start back towards Charlie and Knox’s room. Neil and Meeks walk back in an awkward silence that doesn’t usually happen when Neil is with any of the poets but, before Neil can think about it too much, Meeks speaks.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard you say it outloud.”

“Say what outloud?”

Meeks looks at Neil very directly. “That you love Todd.”

Neil pauses, eyebrows knitting.“Surely I’ve said it at some point—.”

“I mean, maybe to Charlie, I don’t know. But when you talk about it, you normally just talk about ‘having feelings‘. That’s the first time I’ve heard you say ‘I love Todd’.”

Neil is silent.

“Platonic or not, no matter what, Todd will love you. He loves you now, whatever form that may be.”

Neil just looks at Meeks. “I know,” he says, even though Neil won’t let himself believe it.

“He loves you; just remember that before you do something— rash. Okay?”

Neil nods.

After Meeks and Pitts have left, Neil goes back to his and Todd’s room. Todd had said goodbye to the Harvard boys before Neil so he’s already there; Todd is already back to working on homework. He says hello to Neil but seems to be all up in his head focusing on whatever response he’s writing for his english language course. Neil collapses on his own bed, too tired to go back to school work.

It’s still pretty early, at least for Neil’s shit sleeping schedule, but he decides to sleep anyway. He checks his phone before plugging it in.

Neil has two missed calls from his Dad. His ringer was off, because when he’s with all the poets he doesn’t want to be pulled anywhere else. He feels an anxious tug in his chest but then thinks about what Meeks said.

You’re eighteen . Neil is and Meeks has a point, and even if cutting off his relationship isn’t an option, it won’t kill anyone if Neil ignores it now and calls back another time—

Right?

Cameron finds out about Neil’s feelings for Todd next and for once it’s not Charlie’s fault; Neil and Charlie are hanging out when the text comes through.

The Neil Perry Support Group

Knoxious

Guys I kinda fucked up

Knoxious** has added **CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy** to **The Neil Perry Support Group

Smartass Ginger ™

Why welcome Cameron!

That Dipshit Nuwanda

KNOXX WTF WHY DID YOu

TELL CAMERON

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

I'm not even going to ask about this group chat.

Neil Perry

cameron for you

that's probably best

Knoxious

NUWANDA IT'S FINE CAMERON'S ACCEPTED HIS

FATE AS THE MOST RECENT ADDITION TO

THE NEIL IS SIMPING CLUB

Neil Perry

listen

simping needs a lot of emotional support

That Dipshit Nuwanda

exactly that's why it was BORN

That Dipshit Nuwanda *has sent an audio message*

Knoxious

something about the energy of that

last message is,,, uncomfortable

Why is only born capitalized???

Also why did you just send a ten sec

audio message of you playing

a SINGLE saxophone note

That Dipshit Nuwanda *has sent an audio message*

Knoxious

wtf no

the same single note except louder

is /not/ an answer

Also?

where tf are you playing your sax?

i'm in our dorm

and you are not here???

Neil Perry

nuwanda plays his sax in the dorms?

how does everyone nott here him???

Knoxious

I don't know

I didn't even know he owned

a saxaphone until like a week ago?

He played it really loudly right as i walked in

Scared the shit out of me

Neil Perry

lmao

THATS BRILLIANT

Knoxious

NO IT WAS SCARY AS FUCK
okay nuwanda? you alive?

Where are you?

Should we be concerned?

That Dipshit Nuwanda *has sent an audio message*

Knoxious

NO

PLAYING EVEN LOUDER IS NOT HELPFUL

Nuwanda.

where are you?

Why are you like this???

Neil Perry

WE DO NOT ASK WHY NUWANDA

IS THE WAY HE IS

there are some mysteries in the universe

we are not meant to understand

Nuwanda is one of them

Smartass Ginger ™

Okay nuwanda I'm all here for the saxophone audios but

PLEASE tell me next time that it's going to be THAT LOUD

I was wearing my earbuds

And now I'm dying inside

Neil Perry

Awe no, meeks :(

you can assume if an audio comes from nuwanda

it's going to be loud

Smartass Ginger ™

:(((

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

I'm going to pretend this conversation makes sense.

Smartass Ginger ™

we all do cameron

Knoxious

I think Nuwanda and Neil are the only

people who these conversations truly make sense to

Neil Perry *has sent an audio message*

Knoxious

NEIL

NOT YOU TOO

WHY ARE YOU SENDING SAX AUDIOS NOW
HOW AND WHERE DID YOU FIND NUWANDA

OR DO YOU OWN A SECRET SAX TOO???

Smartass Ginger ™

the phrase /secret sax/ sounds

disturbingly sexual for some reason

Neil Perry

everyone loves a good

/secret sax/

Neil Perry *has sent an audio message*

Knoxious

I give up

Smartass Ginger ™

Lmao, glad this group chat is productive in

helping Neil with his love life.

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

But we're not being productive?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

jesus it's called sarcasm richard

Knoxious

NUWANDA

Why won't you respond to me :((((

I want to join you guys

Where are you? :(((((((

That Dipshit Nuwanda

i'm with neil and my

/secret sax/ ;))))

Knoxious

you're the actual worst

"Cameron's been friends with you since way before me," Knox says defensively when he, Neil, Charlie, and Cameron hang out later to plan Todd's birthday. He puts his hands in the air and leans back against Todd's bed. "I assumed he knew!"

The four of them are all sitting on the floor of Neil and Todd's room; Meeks and Pitts are both in classes so they figure they can just fill them in later.

"Wait but how did it even come up?" Neil asks.

There's a party to plan but they keep getting off topic.

Neil's acting casually, trying to be nonchalant about the whole thing and trying *very hard* not to care that nearly all the poets know; he doesn't usually get himself in knots over feelings, he's not that kind of person. He's been thinking too much about his father ever since the conversation with Meeks; but he's also been thinking about what Meeks said about Todd. Neil isn't the conflicted type— he's always known exactly what he wants— so why is he here?

Neil hopes he can find the courage to do what he so desperately wants, to tell Todd how he feels, even though almost everyone knowing adds this new sort of pressure.

"Why did no one let me know sooner?" Cameron asks before Knox can answer Neil's question.

"How could you not tell?" Charlie raises his eyebrows at Cameron. "Neil's been so obvious— it's honestly ridiculous how in love with Todd he is."

Neil looks over at Charlie, getting mock defensive. "I'm really not *that* bad."

Both Knox and Charlie look at each other and then back at Neil.

"Perry—"

“Neil, you’re pretty fucking bad,” Knox says. “But like— in a romantic way.”

Cameron looks around at everyone. “Don’t we have a party to plan?”

Charlie responds by throwing an empty coke can at him.

“Jesus Christ—” Neil says to no one in particular, but he’s smiling now. “How did we get here?”

“Hey, Neil, planning a party for the boy toy was your idea—” Charlie says as he catches the coke can that Cameron has just tried to throw back at him.

“ *Boy toy* ?” Knox says in a surprised, slightly mortified tone.

Neil laughs— which is a relief— as he thinks back to that drive with Charlie where he first told Charlie what he was going to do. “I thought we decided that was a very weird thing to call Todd.”

“It just has— gay energy!” Charlie says like he’s making a good point.

“Everything you say has gay energy,” Knox says without hesitation, like he’s been waiting many conversations to make a comeback like that. “But boy toy does not, it's just straight up creepy; *boy toy* makes Todd sound like Neil’s sugar baby.”

Knox gets hit with the coke can next but this time it’s Neil who throws it. Charlie is laughing too hard and Cameron looks like he’s lost track of the conversation, which he probably has.

“Hey, I’m on your side Neil!” Knox says. “Okay— we are all officially banned from using the phrase *boy toy* ever again.”

Charlie takes the coke can back and tries to throw it across the room into the trashcan but misses by a good two feet. “Okay, okay fine— Neil’s boyfriend *to be* .”

Neil laughs. “I think Nuwanda wants me and Todd to get together more than I want me and Todd to get together. And that’s *really* saying something, considering I’m in love with him.”

There’s a shuffling noise from the direction of the doorway.

Everyone looks up and there’s Todd. He always knocks, but it must have been too quiet for them to hear.

“Hey guys…” Todd says softly, looking around at all the guilty-looking poets. How long had he been standing there?

Neil has said that Todd is a bad liar, which is true, but the full truth is; all the poets are bad at lying. At least to each other. And, due to that small weak spot, Cameron, Knox, Charlie, and Neil are all looking at each other in a very shady manner.

But Cameron is the worst of all of them. Both Neil and Charlie look at him first to make sure he says nothing; whether it be about the sort of surprise party or Neil’s feelings for Todd.

Why do they all have to be so close to each other in the way that makes them god-awful liars? It’s a wonderful thing most of the time. Except in situations like this.

Knox speaks first. “Hey Todd—”

They don’t want to ruin the party plans (which they had actually gotten a little bit done at the beginning) or worse, the fact that Neil not only has feelings for him but is absolutely in love with him.

It’s honestly only *kind of* a surprise. Todd doesn’t like actual surprises — they seem to make him anxious as fuck. But, they’ve figured out a way; Todd has already been told when it’s happening, and Neil already told Todd if the not knowing what to expect makes him too anxious, he’ll happily tell him in advance. Sure, surprises are great, but faithful breaths are better.

“Well I have to go,” Knox says awkwardly because still, no one else is speaking. “Charlie, Cameron— you guys wanna come with me?”

Cameron nods, seemingly thankful for the out, while Charlie stays seated on the floor, looking between Todd and Neil, ready to watch whatever conversation is about to follow. “Nah, I’m good.”

“No, we have places to be—,” Knox says and gives Charlie a pointed look. Charlie rolls his eyes but gets to his feet anyway; Knox grabs his hand and physically drags him out of the dorm room, Cameron trailing behind them. The door clicks shut.

There’s a long moment of silence, and Neil goes to pick up the coke can and then collapses on his bed.

“What were you guys up to?” Todd asks, voice quiet.

“Oh— just birthday stuff,” Neil says generally as possible; he’s not sure if Todd heard. He’s not sure how loud they were or how long Todd was there; he looks over at Todd just to find Todd already looking at Neil, worrying his lip.

“Todd, are you okay?”

Todd snaps out of whatever momentary trance he had gotten into. “Oh— oh yeah.”

Neil raises his eyebrows. “You sure?”

Todd nods.

There’s quiet for a minute before Todd moves from where he’s still standing by the door to sit at the foot of Neil’s bed. Neil looks at him, confused and worrying and expecting; Neil would say something first but if he hasn’t already let Todd know about his feelings, he doesn’t want to ruin that now.

“Can I talk to you about something?” Todd asks. His hands are flat on his legs, and Neil can see he’s pressing his hands down hard; another anxious tick. Whatever he’s about to say has got to be important to him; Todd is never the one to bring things up.

“Okay. What’s up?” Neil wants to ask if this is an *I overheard you love me, I love you back* talk or an *I overheard you love me, I don’t love you, sorry for giving you the wrong idea* talk. Or something completely unrelated. Neil hopes it’s unrelated; he is all the sudden feeling very ill-prepared for a conversation about his feelings for Todd *with* Todd.

Todd visibly tenses and concern grows in Neil’s chest like an invasive weed. He sits there for a moment, waiting for Todd to say something, but Todd seems to be chasing after something in his mind that he can’t quite catch.

“Really— are you okay? Should I be worried?” Neil asks, but softer this time.

Todd is quiet and Neil can see the ‘it doesn’t matter’, the ‘it’s fine’ building in Todd’s throat. Neil puts his hand on Todd’s shoulder and Todd looks down at the hand, words slipping from Todd’s mouth as though they can’t be stopped.

“I’m queer, Neil.”

Neil doesn't know exactly what he was expecting Todd to say, but it wasn't that.

"I— what?"

"You asked me, that time you were drunk if I was gay and— I do like boys. I might like other people, but I don't know— it's always been boys. And it's not that—" Todd trails off, as though he's losing the courage for whatever he was about to say.

This is either Todd trying to tell Neil something or the greatest coincidence in the history of Ever.

"I'm sorry again, I shouldn't have asked that then," Neil responds quickly.

"No— it's not that it bothered me. Honestly, if you hadn't asked, I'm not sure when I would tell you. I've just… I've never come out before."

"I'm the only one you've told?"

Todd nods softly.

"Well still— I should have waited for you to come to me on your own terms; I'm sorry."

"Stop giving yourself a hard time about it; it's okay. That's why I waited— I wasn't ready. But these last few days… I wanted to tell you. I-I've felt ready to tell you. So I am."

Neil is dumbstruck and flattered by the way Todd's heart trusts Neil's hands. Even if this conversation's timing is a coincidence, Neil feels himself relaxing.

"Well thank you," Neil says. "For trusting me."

Todd looks down at his hand and splays out his fingers. "I wanted you to be the first person to know."

Neil doesn't know what to say to that; he doesn't think he can express what that means to him in words. They're both quiet for a bit, but Todd doesn't move back to his desk and Neil doesn't ask him to. Is Todd trying to tell Neil something— should Neil say something? *Can* Neil say something?

Todd speaks before Neil can.

“Neil— can I ask you something personal?”

Neil nods, heart bouncing around his chest like a pinball; he doesn’t know what Todd’s going to ask. For the first time in a long time, Neil doesn’t know what he *wants* Todd to ask. “Yeah. Of course.”

“You’ve been out as long as I’ve known you—” Todd says. “When did you come out? And when did you know?”

Neil has never thought about the fact that Todd wouldn’t have known this information unless Neil told him. And Neil has never told him. Neil takes a moment to organize his thoughts, trying to reorient; that question is sending the conversation in a possibly-not-admiting-feelings direction.

“Well, I knew a long time before I came out,” Neil tells him once he’s gathered that long story in his mind. “I’m one of those people who’s just always known? I know it’s different for everyone but I’ve never even *thought* I liked girls.”

Todd’s listening intently and Neil continues. “But I didn’t know what that meant— I didn’t know what gay was until my dad told me and, as you well know, my dad’s homophobic as fuck. He said it was a bad thing but— it made sense. Even if I didn’t want it to.”

“Shit.”

“So then I knew but I kept it quiet— but then I met Charlie at the end of elementary school and Meeks in middle school. And when Charlie came out in middle school, it made me more comfortable— he’s always been proud of who he is— and he was the first queer person I knew to come out.”

“Charlie came out before you?”

Neil nods. “Oh, yeah; when he came out it was pretty well received at school and by Charlie’s parents. Eighth grade me took that to mean that it was a good time for me to come out as well.”

“Neil—“ Todd says softly and that seems to be all he has to say, but sorry is etched in both his voice and his sweet features. Neil can tell that Todd sees where this is going.

“And I did come out. And, as you can probably guess, it went really badly. Really fucking badly. So I kind of just hid back in the closet? I mean, Charlie knew and Meeks knew but my dad had said I couldn’t

be gay, that it was just another one of my— oh Christ, what was the phrase he used— another one of my 'desperate cries for attention'."

"God. That's—" Todd seems to rummage for the right word, but it seems like no word he can find is strong enough to convey what he's feeling. "A- Awful. And ridiculous."

"Yeah. Yeah, it was. But then I just sort of gradually came out at school sophmore year, once I had kind of gotten the gay thing off of Dad's radar and Meeks came out too. And so by junior year, I was pretty much all out, with my Dad just not acknowledging it, even though I think he knew I wasn't over my 'phase'."

"Damn."

Neil looks at him, offering a small, sad *yeah it sucked in ways I can't even quite describe* smile. "Yeah— why do you ask?"

Todd looks anxious as he offers his answer timidly. "I don't know— I-I guess I've just been wondering what made you comfortable. And just how you always immediately—know what you want."

Neil thinks he gets it.

"I'm still getting comfortable, if I'm honest, but as for knowing what I want," Neil says, looking at Todd. "There are some things— I just know."

Neil doesn't know when he moved, but he's now sitting at the foot of the bed, leaning against the wall with Todd much closer to him. Something has changed and the air is growing thicker.

Todd is thinking, hands fidgeting. "I-It's a lot, figuring it out, you know?"

"Yeah, yeah it is." Neil couldn't have said it better himself.

Todd speaks again, slowly, like he's unsure if he should be asking this.

"Did you— did you ever worry you were broken?"

Neil's caught off guard by that particular question. "How do you mean?"

Todd won't look at Neil, and he's done his protective pulling his knees to his chest thing. "I mean— have you ever worried that you couldn't love correctly? Like, feel like you can't do anything fucking right so

how could you ever love anyone the way you want to without— without screwing it up?"

Neil understands more than Todd could ever know.

"You know—" Neil's never told anyone this part. "When I went back into the closet for a while— it really messed me up for a bit; I was trying to push down all these feelings for boys so I had just sort of numbed myself emotionally? For a while I thought that I couldn't love anyone properly— even platonically for a while. Of course I didn't say anything to any of the poets, I just kept pretending to be myself."

Todd finally looks at Neil and does for a long time, saying nothing. Now it's Neil who can't meet Todd's eyes.

Neil adds on without thinking. "But it's better now— I definitely can. Love, I mean."

"Even romantically?" Todd asks so quietly, so quietly that Neil almost doesn't catch it. But he does. Neil's heart speeds up.

"Even romantically," Neil confirms: there's no way in hell Todd didn't hear his admission.

"And you love someone." It's not a question; Todd is stating a fact.

Neil wants to ask *and you?* But instead he says; "And I love someone."

And then he meets Todd's eyes, and Todd meets his, and there's a very long moment of just dead quiet; Neil doesn't know when they got this close. Everything outside their safe little dorm seems to be moving at ⅕ speed and Neil is positive that this is Todd trying to tell him something and he feels stupid for not seeing that Todd was going around the long way.

Todd is getting better at that; putting words together in just the right way so that he gets across what he's trying to say in as few "embarrassing" words as possible. Maybe Todd doesn't love Neil, but he must like Neil somehow, and he's nervous about coming out. He likes Neil but he's afraid to love and be loved but that's okay because Neil is too.

Neil loves Todd, he *loves* this beautiful gentle boy, whether or not he should and whether or not he can do it correctly. And Todd? Todd is looking at Neil in a way that can't be ignored, that has to mean something, because Todd doesn't look at anyone else like that. He just

doesn't.

Neil's going to kiss Todd because even though fear is running through Neil, cold like water, harsh like electricity, because if he doesn't kiss Todd, Todd's probably going shy away. If he just does it, if he just focuses on *this* between them, his insecurities will fade. And Neil would give everything to run fingers through Todd's hair and tell him, really tell him, that Neil's in love with him. Neil needs to ask him if he can kiss him before he does; he wants to make sure he's right, he wants to make sure Todd's anxiety can handle this.

"Todd?" Neil whispers softly, nearly a breath instead of a name. They're so fucking close; Neil is already closing his eyes because looking at Todd is making Neil go cross-eyed.

"Yeah?" Todd asks, shaky but this strange kind of certain for him. God, Neil is so fucking in love.

"Can I—"

Neil's phone starts to ring.

Chapter End Notes

> I feel mean but also proud for ending the chapter this way.
> thank you so much for reading, i really hope you're enjoying!
> please remember to leave kudos and comments are greatly appreciated < 3

Bros Being Bros

Chapter Summary

just,,, so much angst,,, and so much gay.

Chapter Notes

chapter coming at you all a day early; you all can thank actual angel @aml13 for beta-ing so that i was able to get this chapter done in a timely manner! shoutout to that wonderful human.
also, ngl i listened to chasing cars by coldplay on repeat and cried while writing the majority of this chapter?
i hope you enjoy <3
forever writing,
auxctor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil's eyes are closed but he crushes them shut harder out of sheer frustration; he feels Todd pull away as the phone keeps ringing.

"You— you can get that," Todd says softly.

"No, no. It's fine just; I'll let it ring out and then..." Neil trails off.

But as soon as the ringing stops, in a matter of seconds, it starts ringing again. Neil wants to cry; not just because he's ruining this precious moment with Todd, but he also knows exactly who's calling him.

"It's my Dad," Neil says quietly even though his phone is still across the room from the impromptu party meeting; Todd doesn't ask how he knows. Neil thinks that somehow Todd knew as soon as it began too.

Dread tastes like burnt skin and gasoline, and it takes an immense amount of effort for Neil to get to his feet, go grab his phone and answer the call. But he does. Because he has to.

"Hello sir," Neil says, his voice cracking.

"Neil, why the hell haven't you been returning my calls?"

Neil flinches at his father's rope noose tone. "I'm sorry."

“That’s not an answer,” his father spits. Neil can feel the searing pain of his glare even from hundreds of miles away and he fumbles for an excuse.

“I’ve just been busy, sir.”

“It’s not like you’ve been off at work; you’re still using our money, Neil—”

Neil wants to argue but he’s too exhausted.

His father goes on, “What’s so important that you think it’s alright to ignore your parents?”

School , Neil thinks; he has so many more important things. *Acting. Todd and Charlie. Knox, Meeks, Cameron, Pitts. Studying. Poetry. Kissing cute boys. Book stores. Breathing. Not wanting to die anymore. Not wanting to die anymore. Not wanting to die any—*

But he can’t say most of that, so Neil just says, lamely; “I’ve just been focusing on school—”

“Stop making excuses; you need to take responsibility for your actions and stop with this *blatant* disrespect.”

Neil can feel that this is about to get bad. It’s buzzing through his entire being like a collapsing cavern; the canary in the coal mine of his father's patience is dead. Neil gets up and starts to put on his jacket to go outside. It may be cold but he’s not making Todd watch this. But as soon as he starts, he catches Todd’s eye and Todd does this quick glance down at the spot where Neil had been previously and Neil knows exactly what he’s offering; he and Todd are always set at the same frequency. Neil loves him.

Todd is willing to watch him break down if it means supporting him.

Neil takes off his coat, phone tucked between his ear and his shoulder until he can hold it properly, and then goes to sit next to Todd.

And, they just sit there. Neil’s father scolds him on the other end of the line and Neil is tired of fighting back, so he stays quiet. But Todd sits with him, saying nothing and holding Neil’s free hand with both of his own; Todd squeezes Neil’s hand whenever he hears a particularly bad string of slurs. Neil’s father isn’t talking too insanely loudly. He’s not yelling per-se, but he’s talking strongly and viciously, and Neil knows Todd can hear every word even though his father’s

not on speaker.

Neil is there for a good hour and a half and Todd stays with him the whole time. When his father finally starts to simmer down, Neil is so fucking tired.

“You will respond to me when I call you or so help me God, I will come there and talk to you myself.”

“Yes sir,” Neil says, as confidently as he can but his voice crackles with emotion; he’s been teary for the last hour of this but he knows he can’t cry with his Dad on the line.

“Good. And Neil, your mother and I have decided—“ Neil’s father says. “If you can’t care enough to stay in contact with us, we’d like you home for Christmas.”

Christmas is still about a month away, but Neil feels everything freeze in his bones. “I thought you said since it was my first Christmas as an adult—“

“Neil, don’t argue with me. Your mother wants you home; she wants to talk to you, and seeing as you can’t pick up a goddamn phone—”

Something in Neil cracks— he can’t even imagine going back home. Sure, since his father moved they are no longer in the house Neil grew up in, no longer in the house Neil tried to die in, but he knows everything will remind him of that sour December. That godawful month that wasn’t even a year ago.

“Yes—sir,” Neil says. He stutters, he stumbles. He never sounds like himself when talking to his father.

“Neil, stop being like that,” his father goes back to the tone that makes Neil feel like an idiot; the one that’s so polite and normal that it makes Neil feel like he’s imagining the things his father says to him. “Your mother wants to see you for Christmas; is that really too much for her to ask?”

“—No sir.”

Neil already knows he won’t be able to wash up in a bathroom in his father’s new house without envisioning his own blood on the counter.

His father’s goodbye is brief and unsettling, and for a solid three minutes after the line goes dead, Neil just sits there, staring at the

opposite side of the room and saying nothing.

Neil doesn't try to stop himself from crying. He feels Todd next to him, holding his hand, conveying so much while saying so little.

"Neil, what can I do?" Todd asks, voice so quiet.

Neil just sighs. He feels empty, missing the excitement that was in his bones just two hours ago. "Nothing. There's nothing."

He looks around the room and his eyes snag on his coat, still laying on the back of his desk chair.

"I'm going to go on a walk," Neil says, and he gets to his feet.

Todd watches him get ready to leave."Do you want me to—"

"No, it's alright," Neil says. Everything is so heavy; he can barely take the weight of it. "I just need to breathe for a minute and then you and I can figure things out, yeah?"

"Yeah—okay." Todd just looks at Neil. He's quiet for a moment before speaking again. "Be safe. Please."

Neil can hear the concern and worry in his voice. He comes back to his own bed and kneels for a moment so that he's eye-level with a still seated Todd and takes his hands. Even though parts of Neil are dying, he promised Todd a little less than a year ago that he'd stay alive, and he refuses to break that.

"I will be safe, I promise."

Neil really does intend to go on a walk, but as soon as he gets outside, he finds himself walking around the building to sit.

He sits outside for a long time, watching people pass by and just trying to make everything feel bearable. The end of November wind stings a bit; it's cold enough that his fingers are starting to burn from the cold but something about the pain is comforting, a sick sort of relief.

That's not the vein of thoughts Neil should go down, but he can't help but think it.

He doesn't notice that he brought his phone with him until it buzzes.

Toddy Boy

hey

it's been nearly an hour

do you need me?

Neil tries to think of the right response. *Yes* , he wants to say, *I need you* ; but he knows that Todd means at this moment, not in general.

Neil is slowly realizing the paradox of his emotions; he worries that what he feels for Todd doesn't hurt enough, but it does hurt: Todd's so beautiful that he gets hard to look at. His touch burns. It stings to know that Todd is seeing Neil at a weak moment.

It hurts differently.

It hurts in a way that sands instead of scrapes.

Todd is soft but the love Neil feels for him is so much more intense. If it hurts, he's allowed to love Todd, right?

Neil's phone buzzes in his hands.

if yes, where are you?

Neil thinks about almost kissing Todd. He lets his mind wander, thinking about how Todd is afraid of a lot of the same things as him. Neil remembers his conversation with Meeks.

He loves you; just remember that before you do something rash

Neil's still not exactly sure what Meeks meant by that, but something somewhere is clicking, just a bit. Todd loves him, platonic or not, and he wouldn't want Neil to hide out here alone.

Todd cares about him, and Neil needs to let him. His fingers are so freezing he can't feel the screen of his phone as he texts back.

Neil walks back up to their dorm and finds the door is already open; Todd is sitting on the floor, reading a book. Something about the way his eyes are slightly glossed over makes it seem like he's been rereading the same page for a long time.

"Hey," Neil says. He's about to ask why Todd is on the floor but soon Todd's on his feet and immediately hugs Neil.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Todd mumbles into Neil's jacket.

It's only just then that Neil realizes why Todd has seemed so much more worried this time than any other; Todd has never actually been there while Neil's father is tearing him to pieces before.

"I am. I mean, it was shit—," Neil says. "But he's always like that."

Todd pulls out of the hug; he looks angry, which isn't a way Todd looks too often, but it's not about Neil. Neil knows Todd is angry with his father; something about the fact that Todd cares this much makes Neil love him so much more. But then Todd shakes his head, falling back from anger to empathy and says, quietly, "I'm sorry. I-I'm so sorry."

Both their parents can be awful, but in such different ways. Todd starts to take Neil's hands in his but then drops them immediately.

"Shit—" Todd says, and the look on his face makes Neil laugh as well as he can; his laugh is all hoarse from crying. "Your—your hands are *freezing* ."

But he takes Neil's hands again anyways. Neil looks at Todd for a long time and he wants to kiss him so badly, but he wants to kiss Todd when he doesn't feel like shit; at least the first time.

His voice comes out uneven. "I don't want our first kiss to be like this."

It's funny; they both knew what was going to happen had Neil's dad not called, but Neil saying it out loud makes it a new kind of real. Todd's eyes widen a bit and he turns just the tiniest bit pink.

The thing is, without Neil explaining, Todd seems to understand. “That’s— that’s really okay.”

Despite the nerves in Todd’s voice, Neil can tell he means it. Todd isn’t angry or upset; that’s not how the two of them work. When one of them isn’t doing well, whether it be mental illness or issues with their parents, they have a silent understanding that nothing comes before feeling better.

“Thank you for understanding.”

Neil wants to kiss Todd on a day that he can kiss Todd just because he loves him, not also because he wants Todd to comfort him. He wants to kiss Todd on a day where he can focus just on Todd and not the impending explosions in his bones.

Plus, Neil’s kind of gross from crying.

They stand there silently for a while before going to sit on Neil’s bed, back where they were before the phone rang. When they do, Todd starts drawing shapes on Neil’s palm with his pointer finger, but it looks like Todd’s not even aware he’s doing it. Surprisingly, Todd breaks the silence, stuttering, and shy.

“Well— just so you know… you can. Whenever—”

“You mean kiss you?” Neil turns to look Todd in the eyes but Todd looks away because he’s turning pink again.

Todd nods. “I would do it— but I-I’m just not sure...“

He stops there but Neil is almost positive he was going to say something along the lines of *if I’d have the courage.*

“Okay,” Neil says. And to show that he means it, he takes Todd’s hand to his lips and kisses each one of his knuckles, because he’s wanted to do that for a year now, and it’s a small offering he can give Todd at the moment. “That alright?”

Todd is looking at Neil’s lips against his fingers and he kind of looks like he’s about to pass out. Or have a heart attack. Or both; but once he seems to process what Neil has said, he nods emphatically.

“Very.”

They both curl up in Neil’s bed; it’s getting dark. Their fingers and legs

tangle and they don't fall asleep, they just talk in this darkness. Their little capsule of home.

Neil isn't exactly sure when, but during one of the breaks in conversation, Neil starts to cry again. He's so sick of crying, but today has been so much, both good and bad. It's overwhelming. He doesn't cry hard; he doesn't even realize what he's doing until he tastes salt, but Todd must feel tears on the back of his neck from the way Neil is curled around him because he turns back to face Neil.

"Hey—" is all Todd says. He holds Neil's hand tightly and meets Neil's eyes.

"Todd?" Neil asks.

"Yeah?"

"You're too good to me."

Todd just looks at him for a minute before starting to shake his head. "No—no."

"Yes, you are. Everything with Dad was shit," Neil says. "And then I come back in here and it still hurts, it feels so sharp, but then we talk and you're here and you care and are so good to me and things still hurt but— you make it softer."

Todd looks at him, eyes wider, seemingly unsure what to say.

Neil pushes the forever wayward piece of hair out of Todd's eyes. "You make everything softer."

Neil can see, because of the way the streetlights from outside stream ever so slightly through their window, that Todd's eyes are a little watery too.

"You're so good," Neil says, quietly, catching Todd's eyes as best as Todd will let him.

"No—" Todd says, shaking his head, and gingerly cupping one side of Neil's jaw with the hand that isn't holding Neil's. Then he leans forward, careful and nervous, to press a careful kiss to Neil's cheek, in one of the places where tears have tracked. His fingers are soft.

"Is that— is that okay?" Todd asks in a hushed voice.

Neil nods and lets his eyes close for a moment as Todd presses another

shakey kiss to his cheek, but opens them when he remembers how intensely he was ugly-crying earlier.

“Todd,” Neil says, voice low. “I’m probably all gross from earlier— I’m a gross crier.”

Todd just looks at Neil, shakes his head, and presses another tender kiss to Neil’s face, this time on his forehead, and the sweetness of it all overwhelms Neil even more.

“No,” Todd says quietly again. “I’m not— ‘m not good to you because *I’m* good. I’m good to you because, Neil— you deserve it. You— you deserve so much more than what you’ve gotten.”

Neil lets his eyes close again when Todd goes to give him another kiss on the cheek.

“Neil—” Todd says, slow and nervous but in this honest and raw way he’s only used in front of Neil in little segments. As Todd talks, he keeps breaking up his sentences with little kisses to Neil’s features. “Everything— everything is so loud. All the time. Everywhere I go, everything is overwhelming and deafening. But you’re so different— you make everything quieter. You may be—”

He breaks up his sentence with a very small laugh before going on.

“You may be loud. You talk loudly— and a lot”

That makes Neil laugh too. He keeps listening. Todd pulls away to look at Neil as he speaks and Neil isn’t sure he’s ever heard Todd say this many sentences in a row before without someone contributing to the conversation.

“But— you’re the good kind of loud; most people make me anxious when they talk too loudly and you— that doesn’t happen often with you. Everything is too much all of the time but— things make sense with you. You make me feel safe and steady and— and so much calmer; I-I’ve never been able to say that about anyone before.”

Neil cannot explain how soft his heart is at this moment; he just wants to give it to Todd. He doesn’t care what Todd does with it— right now, he doesn’t care about the risks of giving himself up, he just wants Todd to have everything he wants and more. If Todd can’t breathe from the anxiety, Neil would happily offer up his lungs; Neil would take himself apart, one bone, one vein, one cell at a time if Todd asked.

But Todd would never ask for something like that.

“Thank you,” Neil says quietly. “Thank you. But you are good; you’re so good.”

Todd looks at Neil for a very long time before speaking again. The hour gets later; Neil kisses Todd’s forehead and his knuckles and his palms; Todd touches Neil’s face sweetly and catches Neil’s gaze in a way he’s not normally calm enough to do.

Todd’s final comment is quiet but covered in sweet and vulnerable honesty:

“You make me able to catch my breath, Neil Perry.”

The next morning is something surreal; Neil has seen Todd many mornings since they became roommates, but never like this. Todd’s fuzzy and soft with sleep, and since Neil doesn’t bother putting on his glasses or contacts this morning, Todd’s just blurry enough around the edges for Neil to almost not believe it’s real.

But it is.

After a while of just talking, (Neil swears to God he and Todd could talk for days straight, without interruption and never run out of things to talk about), Todd turns off of his back to face Neil. Neil has propped himself up on his elbow, and Todd does the same.

“I-I just wanted to tell you— just in case you didn’t get this in the past eighteen hours,” Todd says slowly, a little smile spreading across his face. He doesn’t look directly at Neil, cheeks pink. “I really like you.”

Neil laughs a little bit at that. “Good to know.”

“Okay, okay, I need to be— I need to be serious for a moment though —” Todd says. He sits up fully, sits cross-legged, and begins to fidget.

“What’s up?” Neil pulls himself up to sit as well.

“I just wanted to make sure you know, really know, that I like you a lot. But I’m still trying to— I’m still trying to figure this all out, particularly— the love thing.”

Todd goes on for a while longer, sentences stumbling over each other

in an anxious stampede. He thinks he's liked Neil for a while, but he's only figured it all out recently. Todd's not ready to say I love you but he's worried Neil's going to take that the wrong way; he did overhear what Neil told the poets.

"Todd, hey. Todd. Slow down. That's really okay— I know you like me now, and that's all that matters. You never owe me anything, remember?"

Todd smiles, breath immediately pacing itself again. "Yeah, okay— thank you."

"And," Neil says, trying not to laugh, " if it helps you figure things out at all, this all— last night and this morning— hasn't just been bros being bros."

Neil gets hit with a pillow for that.

"I know that!" Todd laughs. "I'm very aware that I'm not straight, thank you very much."

"Jesus," Neil says. "Charlie's right; Cameron is our token straight."

Todd grins. Neil moves to be shoulder to shoulder with Todd, and their legs overlap. Todd leans his head on Neil's shoulder.

"Speaking of which—" Neil says, taking one of Todd's hands and interlocking their fingers because he can. "Do you mind if I mention to the poets that you're queer? They're going to be asking about what happened with us, and this is hard to explain if they think you're 100% heterosexual."

"Yeah, sure. I mean, Meeks and Knox already know—"

"They already know??"

"Well, I needed people to talk about it too!"

"Why didn't they tell me?"

"Because I told them not to," Todd shrugs. "I mean, I've been talking to Meeks about sexuality stuff since the beginning of the summer. I knew Cameron's bad at keeping secrets and I knew Charlie would tell you anything, so— yeah. And Knox joined us and he and I have gotten along pretty well, we've got a lot in common, such as knowing how quiet works but having roommates who don't—"

“Hey!”

“I think they were trying to nudge me in the right direction, though. But I didn’t know for sure that you—”

There are three loud knocks on the door. Neil looks over at Todd and Todd just smiles a bit, and holds Neil’s hand firmly. They’re doing this.

“Come in!” Neil says.

Neil’s pretty sure Knox and Charlie are like Beetlejuice, because after he says either of their names too many times he swears to god, they always find a way to appear. Because that’s who storms into the dorm just then.

Knox is pulling Charlie behind him, in somewhat of the same manner he dragged Charlie out yesterday. Charlie doesn’t look at Neil or Todd; he’s looking at Knox with an amused expression, like he’s having a hard time taking Knox seriously. Knox looks almost angry. Knox doesn’t really get angry as far as the poets know, but he looks like he’s *trying* to be angry. And failing. But A for effort?

It’s kind of funny but Neil forces himself not to laugh.

“Is Todd here?” Knox asks, and it seems to take him a moment to realize that Todd is in fact there, and is in Neil’s bed, left leg clearly overlapping Neil’s right, hand in Neil’s. Knox does a quick double-take.

“Hi,” Todd says quietly.

“Hey,” Knox says, and then he looks back at Charlie, who’s noticed them by now, too. They both raise their eyebrows; Charlie smirks and Knox smiles.

They’re both wearing yesterday’s clothes and Charlie gives Neil a completely non-subtle wink.

Knox turns back to Neil and Todd, addressing Neil. “Well, I’m borrowing your—” Knox’s mouth forms around the word boyfriend but then he seems to realize that he’s actually not positive that that’s what happened. “—Todd.”

Neil looks at Todd and they both grin.“Well—here’s my Todd then?”

“Why do you need me—?” Todd asks Knox as he gets up.

Knox claps his hands. “We’re having a fun little lesson today.”

“Lesson?” Neil asks, and Knox shuts the door that Charlie never closed with his foot. Charlie looks as though he, like Neil, is trying not to laugh.

“Today we’re going to teach Charlie and Todd—” Knox looks between the two of them. “How to fucking knock. Because apparently neither of them knows how to.”

Neil laughs. “Oh my god, that’s what this is about?”

“Yes,” Knox says, face stern; it’s a face Neil is slowly starting to recognize as the fed-up-with-Charles-Dalton’s-bullshit face. Charlie is still clearly trying very hard not to laugh.

“Jesus Charlie,” Neil grins, “ What’d you do? What’d you walk in on?”

Knox and Charlie both very pointedly ignore Neil’s question.

“Okay— let’s get started,” Knox says.

“I know how to knock!” Todd defends quietly.

“In order for it to count, we have to actually be able to hear it— yesterday, example A.”

And so, for the next thirty minutes, Knox teaches Charlie and Todd how to knock; it’s one of the funniest things Neil thinks he’s even seen in his entire 18.6 years on God’s green Earth; Knox is so fed up with all of their shit.

“No Charlie, why do you feel the need to slam your entire fucking body against the door—”

“Todd, that is not loud. That’s like— a slightly frantic cricket—”

“Charlie, can you just *not* for five seconds?”

“Neil— stop encouraging him! That’s not helpful.”

And, on top of that all, there’s a funny thing about Knox and Charlie: they’re different today.

Knox sighs. “Yes Charlie, we get it, you’re cute; that doesn’t make you

any less annoying."

Charlie, for the sixth time that Neil has noticed, doesn't correct Knox on his name. "I'm not cute— I'm *adorable* ."

By the end of the "lesson", Knox looks like he's about to stab everyone there and then himself, (though he might spare Todd, who was only being *kind of* annoying); if Knox doesn't commit mass murder, he must be at least considering taking up drinking full time. (Neil thinks anyone who rooms with Charlie would.)

"Hey," Charlie says as soon as Knox seems somewhat satisfied with his knocking skills. "Neil and I are going to go get food."

Neil's still sitting on his bed and has just started to talk to Knox, but he listens anyway and follows Charlie.

As soon as the door shuts behind them and they are about three paces away from Neil and Todd's dorm room, Charlie immediately lets out a screech. Everyone in the hallway looks at him but he doesn't take notice and/or care.

"Neil!" Charlie says as they start down the stairs. "You haven't messaged any of us—we've been blowing up the support group chat— what happened with you and Todd?? Are you guys in deep, passionate love?"

"A lot happened," Neil starts and is about to go on but Charlie has already started asking questions.

"Did you dumbasses *finally* kiss?"

Neil actually has to think for a moment; after a second he seems to realize that no, they never actually ended up kissing. Not in the way Charlie means; he knows Charlie would definitely not count cheek and forehead kisses. "No."

"Did you fuck?"

"No!"

"Are you guys dating?"

Neil thinks; they never explicitly said. "I actually *don't know* ."

"You *don't know* ?"

“I mean, I think so? I’m like 92% sure?”

Charlie laughs. “What *do* you know?”

“Well, you all left, and then things were really awkward, and then Todd— came out.”

“He came out?!” Charlie says, batting Neil’s arm in excitement, then whoops so loudly that even though they’re on the ground floor now, he’s pretty sure Knox and Todd probably heard.

Neil grins. “Yes, he came out and we talked for a little while, he was asking about my coming out and some other stuff and then we almost kissed.”

“So you only *almost* kissed?” Charlie asks, eyebrows raised and smirk extra— smirky.

“Yes! Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I guess I was just expecting a little more— *sauce* .”

“ *Sauce* ?”

“Yes! Sauce,” Charlie says matter-of-factly as they step out into a chilly early afternoon. Neil has no clue where they’re going to get food or if they even are going to get food, so he just stays in step with Charlie and watches where he goes.

“Well, I’m not done with the story yet.”

Charlie looks excited. “Oohh— so it gets saucier?”

Neil pauses. “Well— no.”

“Goddammit, Neil.” Charlie rolls his eyes, looking annoyed and overdramatically disappointed at the lack of face-sucking that occurred between Neil and Todd in the past day.

“But there’s still more to the story. It may not be saucy in the way you mean but— it was still a lot!”

Charlie snaps his fingers impatiently. “Well then speed it up grandpa, you’re losing me.”

“Well then—,” Neil says. “Long story but my dad called and I talked to him—”

“Your dad called? And you picked up? Why the hell would you do that?”

Neil elbows him. “Okay, Nuwanda, can you please shut up and let me tell the story?”

“ *Okay* .”

“And so I was in a shit mood after getting off the phone, as you can guess, and I don’t know— Todd was just there for me. And so we just talked for a while and he said that he has feelings for me too and we just kind of sat together. And talked some more. And held hands.”

“You *held hands* ?” Charlie says, looking greatly offended.

“Yes?” Neil grins at Charlie’s reaction; he always makes Neil’s storytelling extra dramatic.

“And that’s not a euphemism?” Charlie asks.

Neil lets out a scoff of a laugh and crosses his arms because the chill is getting to him; they’re just walking around campus aimlessly at this point, lunch forgotten.“What exactly would that be a euphemism for?”

“I don’t fucking know! You guys just have about a year’s worth of romantic and sexual tension stored up— what couple confesses their undying love for each other and then just—holds hands?” Charlie looks offended on behalf of gays everywhere.

“Todd and I, apparently!”

Charlie just looks at Neil.

Neil goes on: “And he didn’t tell me he loved me, he just likes me right now, but it’s alright. Anyway, last night we just kind of— fell asleep in my bed together.”

Charlie pauses and then says slowly, as if to clarify; “So you *didn’t* fuck?”

“No!” Neil laughs, exasperated.

“Damn,” Charlie says, shaking his head. “That’s the worst, most anti-climactic get-together story *ever* .”

“Well, I thought it was sweet.”

“It is sweet— really sweet,” Charlie says, and then he mimes throwing up. Neil swears Charlie Dalton’s opinion on love changes every five minutes

Neil shoves Charlie, but they’re both laughing; Charlie shoves Neil back.

“Anyway,” Neil says, grinning because he now has something to give Charlie shit about. “What’s going on with you and Knox?”

Charlie looks over at Neil abruptly from wherever his gaze had wandered off to. “What?”

Neil rolls his eyes. “Oh, don’t pretend there isn’t something going on— ever since he and his girlfriend broke up, you two have been different.”

“Nothing. There is nothing going on between us,” Charlie says much too quickly in a very not Charlie voice. The regular smile-smirk has faltered

“Okay,” Neil says, caught off guard because Charlie has never reacted to a relationship related comment like that before. “Okay, must have misread. Sorry.”

“Yeah—” Charlie says, and then seems to recover. “Well, back to you; now that Todd’s your lover—”

Neil raises his eyebrows.

“Tomorrow’s his birthday—” Charlie goes on.

Neil smiles slightly but tries to act skeptical. “Yeah. And?”

“You could always,” Charlie makes a clicking noise with his tongue and winks suggestively. “ *Give him a birthday gift* .”

Neil shoves Charlie into the nearest bush, both of them laughing much harder than they need to. Because Neil’s happy. And his best friend is happy for him. And things are more comfortable than Neil thought was possible less than two days ago.

Knox must of had a similar conversation with Todd as Neil and Charlie did, because after Knox and Charlie leave, the first thing out of Todd’s mouth is:

“Wait so— we’re dating—? Right?” He looks slightly nervous.

Neil goes to flop down on his own bed because that’s where Todd is. “Yeah, I was hoping so? That alright?”

Todd nods, a grin spreading across his face. “Very.”

Neil smiles back at him. Todd fucking Anderson is his boyfriend.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you enjoyed! please remember to leave kudos and know that comments are greatly appreciated <3

Sweet Nothings

Chapter Summary

it's todd's birthday and neil is VIBING

Chapter Notes

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR ALL THE KIND WORDS! i was completley overwhelmed by all the comments this past week, and it made my heart so happy to know that you're enjoying. i still plan on updating on wednesdays, and the next chapter will still be over a week, but since it's not often i get a chapter done three days early, i thought i'd go ahead and post this one! <3
also i literally woke from a dead sleep two different nights this week with ideas for this fic? so you can blame my subconscious for all the dick jokes.
and of COURSE! big fuckin shoutout to my beta bro @aml13 for beta-ing, being there to bounce ideas off of, and talking about dps with me. if you haven't already, pls go check out their Knarlie fic 'If I Needed Someone'. it's absolutely wonderful!
i hope you all enjoy <3
yours,
auxctor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Neil Perry Support Group

That Dipshit Nuwanda

NOPE

THIS GC IS STAYING ACTIVE
UNTIL YOU

1) KISS HIS FACE

2) TELL HIM YOU LOVE HIM

3) EXAMS ARE OVER AND Y'ALL ARE CUTE BOYFRIENDS

Neil Perry

we are cute boyfriends!

aaaahhhhhhhhhhHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

shit

we really are boyfriends

fuck guys.

i have a boyfriend

and said boyfreind

is

Todd.

Anderson.

aaaaHHHHHHHH

That Dipshit Nuwanda

AAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

Knoxious

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAhhhhhhhhhhhh

hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Neil Perry

AHHHHHHHHHH

HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

Are we screaming over Todd and Neil's relationship?

That Dipshit Nuwanda

clearlY ricHard.

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

AAAAAHHHHHH?

Neil Perry

AAAAAHHHHHH.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Maybe AAAAAHHHHHH

will be our always

Neil Perry

ajdjkjhdljdihjhlhbhfgl

WHERE DID THE JOHN GREEN

REFERENCE COME FROM??

That Dipshit Nuwanda

OKAY SO

while you and Todd were shacking up

Knoxious

pls don't judge me

That Dipshit Nuwanda

knoxX and I watched the fault in our stars

it was knox's IDEA
JUDGE! HIM!

Knoxious

I LIKE IT OKAY

it's a good movie :(((((

Neil Perry

SKKKK OH MY GOD
also todd and i were not shacking up

we didn't even kiss

That Dipshit Nuwanda

yes yesss we knoW

you guys are all PURE 'n stuff

Neil Perry

,,,shut up

Smartass Ginger ™

Hi! Sorry was in class!

But Charlie and knox filled Pitts and I in

AND CONGRATS!!!

Also while you were MIA we added Pitts to the chat

Pittsie

hey hey hey!

Congrats Neil!

Neil Perry

THANK YOU

That Dipshit Nuwanda

OKAY NO BUT MY POINT LIKE SEVENTY MESSAGES AGO
is exams suck

But over break you guys will be able to reach your true gay potential

SO WE MUST SUPPORT YOU

AT LEAST UNTIL THEN

IF NOT LONGER

Neil Perry

okay OKAY

also WE ARE MEETING TONIGHT IN

KNOX AND NUWANDA'S ROOM TO

FINISH PARTY PLAANING

meeks & pitts you all should facetime us so you can help!

WAIT YOU ALL ARE COMING TOMORROW RIGHT

Pittsie

Yes we are!

Meeks' car broke down yesterday (rip)

But we've got mine

That Smartass Ginger ™

Yeah and we should be free to facetime in like an hour?

Wait Pitts you finished your chemistry shit right?

Pittsie

Lord yes jesus meeks you sound like my mom

That Dipshit Nuwanda

OKAY NO MORE REPUBLICAN STEP DAD STEVEN
ITS TIME FOR SOCCER MOM STEVENNNN

Neil Perry

OH MY GOSH MEEKS IS OUR MOM NOW

Smartass Ginger ™

I hate you all but for some reason

am simultaneously honored

Neil Perry

YES NO MORE SHITTY PARENTS
ALL PRAISE MAMA MEEKS

That Dipshit Nuwanda

MAMA MEEKS

Smartass Ginger ™

Oh my god lmao

Smartass Ginger *™ 's name has been changed to* ***Mama Meeks***

That Dipshit Nuwanda

OH MY GOD PITTS CAN YOU
/PLEASE/ BE OUR DAD
WE NEED ONE
(particularlyyy neil)

Neil Perry

skskksk

really out here exposing me

and my daddy issues

Pittsie

OH YES SURE

That Dipshit Nuwanda

PITTS IS DADDY ;)

Neil Perry

NUWANDA NO

Uhhh also back to party planning tho

See you all in an hour?

also i have a NEW BETTER party idea

Pittsie** 's name has been changed to **Daddy Pitts

Mama Meeks

Oh my god

That Dipshit Nuwanda

okay but

QUICK PARTY GROUND RULE

Neil Perry

Nuwanda making ruless?

wat fresh hell is this???

That Dipshit Nuwanda

no sucking dick during the party

before and after ONLY

Neil Perry

nuWANDA

Knoxious

ankjqldhedbkhbdkhbd

good to know we have rules for neil and todd

Otherwise it would be dick sucking anarchy

Neil Perry

KNOX

That Dipshit Nuwanda

actuslly NEVER MIND i don't contrrol you

have a good time

live ur best life

suck dick as you please

Mama Meeks

Nuwanda!

Knoxious

blowjob anarchy it is

Neil Perry

GUYS

NO DICK SUCKING WILL BE HAPPENING

(probably)

That Dipshit Nuwanda

SKKSKKS

WE SEE THAT PROBABLY

Knoxious

IN THIS HOUSEHOLD WE SUCK DICK AT OUR DISCRETION

Daddy Pitts

In this household I support my sons' gay life decisions

Mama Meeks

PITTS

Neil Perry

SKKSKSKKS

glad to know i have dick-sucking freedom

That Dipshit Nuwanda

you'll need it

;)))))))))))))))

It snows the night before Todd's birthday.

Neil sees it as soon as he wakes up and it makes him smile. Something about snow makes everything feel magical; it's the one thing that reminds Neil of his childhood that doesn't make his heart drop. Snow is the one thing Neil can find nostalgia in.

Neil is up for a while and just scrolls through his phone until he feels

Todd stir next to him.

“Todd?” Neil whispers.

“MMmmMm?” is Todd’s ever so eloquent half-asleep response as he rolls over to bury his face in Neil’s t-shirt.

“Happy birthday.”

“Ew,” he mumbles.

“Todddd—” Neil whines over-dramatically “I swear it’s gonna be a good one.”

Todd makes an unintelligible noise.

“Todd I swear, it’s going to be something you’ll really like. The poets and I changed our minds from the whole party plan.”

A still sleepy Todd pulls back to look at Neil. “What’d you mean?”

“We were talking last night and we thought that since it’s you, especially since you’ve never really done a big thing for your birthday, it would be better to tone it down? We’re just going to have just a regular poets meeting; we’re still going to do cake and something better than Charlie's shitty beer, but no singing or any of that shit. I mean, if you want to do something big we can go back but I thought that might be kind of overwhelming.”

Todd just looks at Neil for a moment before he breaks into a sweet morning smile.

“Oh my god, you are all my completely favorite humans—” Todd says, and gives Neil a kiss on the jaw. “That’s perfect.”

Neil grins at him. “Okay. Okay, good.”

Todd gives him another kiss, this time on his cheek.

“If the party was something you were dreading, you could have told me and I would have changed it sooner—I just wasn’t thinking. It helped to have Meeks and Pitts as voices of reason, to be honest; you know Charlie and I can get ahead of ourselves.”

Todd smiles a bit more and kisses Neil on the cheek again. He doesn’t need to answer why he didn’t say something sooner; anxiety’s a real bitch.

Neil goes on. “And it’s probably better that we toned it down sooner rather than later; Charlie kept suggesting male strippers, and I’m not entirely sure he was kidding.”

This makes Todd laugh and he lets himself curl into Neil more, putting his face in the crook of Neil’s neck. “Hey, Neil?”

“Yeah?” Neil pulls back to kiss the top of Todd’s head before going back to how they were.

“Thank you.”

Neil doesn’t ask what for; he understands. He feels as though he’s getting better at understanding the places that anxiety won’t let Todd go, and that makes him feel better; he just wants Todd to be comfortable. He always wants Todd to be able to take a deep breath.

After getting an early brunch Todd starts to get anxious, so he and Neil go back to lay in Neil’s bed until Todd can find some semblance of peace in his bones. Luckily, around an hour before the party, Todd’s anxiety finally decides to take itself down a few notches, and he clearly feel grateful for it. Neil can read the relief in all his features.

“We’ve got to get ready,” Todd says into Neil’s sweatshirt. Neil nods, gives Todd one more forehead kiss, and then gets up to get dressed. He turns his back to Todd as he does.

They’ve gotten dressed in front of each other dozens of times, they live together for God’s sake, but it seems to just be the polite thing to not watch each other get ready; at least until they sleep together.

Todd’s dressed differently than normal; that’s the first thing Neil notices when he turns back around. He looks so— pretty. It’s not that Todd isn’t always pretty or that he’s a poor dresser in any way, shape, or form, it’s just Neil’s never seen him dress quite in the way he is now. He’s got a floral button-down tucked into a pair of mom jeans and a pair of checkered vans.

Neil didn’t know it until today, but he’s been waiting his entire life to see Todd in mom jeans.

Todd must notice Neil starting. "Just ignore the clothes— it's Charlie's fault. After we went to coffee the other day he decided that I, and I quote, ' *need to learn how to fashion* '. So we went shopping and— and this happened. I-I've previously been too anxious to do it but I'm always anxious so— fuck that."

"No, no. You're just so gorgeous. Jesus Christ."

Todd turns pink in an instant.

His voice is extremely humble and quiet when he answers. "Thank you, Neil."

Neil grins at him and Todd smiles back.

"Wait… if Meeks and Knox already knew, how was I the first person you came out too?" Neil's not exactly when he and Todd ended up here, but since they still had some time before the meeting, they'd fallen into a mix of conversations.

Todd smiles shyly and pulls at a string on his jeans. They're both sitting on Todd's bed now, and he has his legs in Neil's lap as they talk."I guess, yeah, you could say I came out to them first. But it wasn't so much coming out to them— we've just been talking through things since I was confused. But you're the first person I just— straight up told. I haven't told Jeffery or my parents or anyone like that."

Neil grins. "Ha, *straight* up."

"You're the worst," Todd says but he's smiling. He brushes some hair out of Neil's eyes. It's almost strange how easily this comes to the both of them. Todd seems to have gotten easily comfortable with more physical contact between him and Neil and that makes Neil light up inside.

"Wait, Todd?" Neil says suddenly, moving Todd's legs off his lap, and getting up.

"What?" Todd grabs Neil's hand to check the watch on Neil's wrist. " 'S not time to go yet."

"No, I know," Neil says and Todd lets go of his hand. Neil grabs the package off of his desk chair and hands it to him. "I got you things."

Todd looks down at the box wrapped in dark blue paper and back up at Neil. "I told you that you didn't need to get me anything."

"I wanted to," Neil smiles, "Plus, you didn't say I couldn't."

Neil had come up with the idea a few days after the bookstore; he

doesn't know if it's the perfect thing, but it seems like a pretty damn good thing.

Todd shakes his head at Neil but there's still a small smile on his lips. Neil settles back next to him. "Come on. Open it."

After quickly kissing Neil on the cheek, Todd does. Todd opens it painfully slowly. He's one of those people who doesn't rip the paper, he just takes the tape off one piece at a time and unfolds it. But, eventually, he opens the box to find four books.

It's three books of poetry and a notebook.

"The top one is Shakespeare sonnets," Neil says. "The other two books are just various poetry. The bottom one is just an assortment of 19th century American poetry; there's Whitman, Thoreau, Poe, Garland, a lot of good ones. And then the other one is just a mix. And then the notebook, for writing your own poetry."

"Neil—"

"I was pretty positive you didn't have any of these yet but if you do, I still have the receipt," Neil finishes. He's got his arms behind him and is leaning back on his palms, watching Todd's reaction.

"Neil—this would have been expensive." Todd may not know the extent of Neil's money situation, but he knows that Neil is a broke college student and that brand new books can be expensive. But that doesn't matter to Neil. He only had to skip a few things in order to buy them for Todd.

Neil shakes his head. "It's fine, really. I wanted to get them for you."

Todd just looks at him.

"I haven't even shown you the best part," Neil says, leaning closer to Todd and knocking Todd's shoulder with his own. "Flip through one of the books."

Todd does. He flips through the book of sonnets first, and then through another one. "It's— it's annotated."

"I tried to annotate it the way you always do in your books because I always love reading the notes you write. A lot of the notes are more opinions and thoughts than actual imagery analyzing shit but I thought you'd like it. And then I also highlighted the ones that made

me think of you."

"Neil," Todd says, eyes soft. He's still next to Neil but they're close enough that their shoulders are overlapping.

"And then I tried to write you a sonnet on the first page of the notebook," Neil says. "I want you to read it when I'm not here because I'm worried that it very potentially could be awful. But I wrote it in iambic pentameter and everything—"

Neil doesn't get to finish because then Todd's kissing him. It's a short kiss; Todd pulls away just moments after, face pink; (Neil swears that Todd spends the majority of his life a little pink). Todd leaves a gentle hand on Neil's cheek and just grins at him until he seems to get too embarrassed to hold Neil's gaze anymore.

"Hey," Neil says, grinning slightly at him.

"Hi," Todd responds, infinitely soft.

"So I'm going to take that as a sign that this was an okay gift?"

Todd nods. "You're just— you're perfect, you know that?"

Neil doesn't know what to say in response. He finds the compliment filling him with warmth while simultaneously being a little afraid to be named perfection. Todd knows what a wreck Neil can be, doesn't he?

"Thank you," Todd says. Neil tries to push the insecurity out of his head and takes Todd's hand in his.

"You deserve it all."

And Todd does.

It's only a few more minutes before six, so Neil walks Todd to Charlie and Knox's dorm. It's Neil's job to go pick up food, as neither Cameron nor Charlie wanted to do it and Knox has spent all day studying for a test on Monday (Neil's pretty sure he's trying to plan in case he spends Sunday hungover). And Neil does get the food as soon as he's walked Todd; Neil knows he doesn't need to walk him to their dorm, but it seems like a sweet thing to do.

Charlie comes out of the room just as Neil is giving Todd a quick “see you in a half an hour” kiss on the cheek.

“Gay,” is all Charlie says before turning back into the dorm.

“Thanks for the clarification— I was under the impression I was completely heterosexual,” Neil says after him, voice wrapped in sarcasm. That makes Todd laugh. Charlie flicks them both off.

Neil isn’t gone for long, but by the time he gets back, Meeks, Pitts, and Cameron are all there. Before he starts to talk to everyone, Neil takes a risk and turns his phone off for the night. He wants this night to just be about Todd, and no one or nothing else.

Everyone still brought Todd some sort of gift, but Todd insists on waiting until after to open them; he looks like he feels guilty to be receiving any gift at all.

Meeks and Pitts brought some food, as well, and Charlie’s managed to snag a few bottles of wine for the occasion. Cameron brought some plastic cups and Knox keeps apologizing that he didn’t do more but every time Neil or Todd tries to assure him that it’s really alright, Charlie tells Knox to chill out. Before anyone reads any poetry, they all fall into little various conversations with each other.

"The fact that I-I prefer wine to beer makes me feel pretentious,” Todd’s saying to Knox and Neil as Cameron and Charlie bicker across the room. Pitts and Meeks are trying to mediate whatever’s happened between them.

Neil laughs. "Well Todd, I think that the fact that you prefer wine to beer because wine is a ' *pleasant color* ' and beer tastes like ' *dead soda* ' makes it about 98 % less pretentious."

Knox laughs loudly.

Todd turns pink. "When did I say that?"

"Last year when you got a little too drunk at Charlie's birthday. I had to drive you home, remember?"

Todd puts his red face in his hands. "Shit."

"Don't worry Todd," Knox says, patting Todd on the back. "Beer really does taste like dead soda— couldn't have put it better myself."

This makes a still red Todd laugh. The rest of the poets join the conversation. Neil's still not sure exactly what Charlie and Cameron were arguing about but he does know that Cameron's white t-shirt is stained all down the front with red wine.

As usual, during the meeting, everyone except Todd reads poetry. Todd, over the past year, has gotten calm enough to read meetings a handful of times and Neil is so proud of him for that. But today isn't a reading day and that's really truly okay, too. Neil is still proud of Todd.

Neil reads an old anonymous love poem he found in one of Todd's poetry books, and it would be a really sweet gesture if Charlie didn't keep wolf-whistling and the other poets didn't keep making various suggestive jokes. But it's okay; it's all funny, and truth be told all that matters is Todd is grinning and the rest of the poets are smiling too.

Towards the end of Neil's poem, Neil notices Charlie looking at Knox in this soft way that looks alien on his face. Nobody else notices.

After Neil goes Charlie, then Cameron, and then Pitts. The poems aren't birthday themed or anything like that, but Neil watches Todd revel in the way language fills the room, sweet and strange and divine. Todd looks so enchanted, and Neil is so deeply in love with both poetry and Todd.

It's after Knox's poem (which is also a love poem) that Knox returns Charlie's soft look. When he finishes, he glances at Charlie but Charlie catches his gaze.

Knox and Charlie look at each other for a lingering moment.

Now *that* , everyone notices. The entire room comes to a halt to try and understand what's happening between them.

"Anyway," Charlie says, looking away from Knox once he's realized everyone is looking at them, pretending like the air isn't thick with awkward romantic or sexual tension or whatever the hell is pulling them into each other's orbits like planets becoming victim to gravity.

Meeks reads last and after he does, they all clap. It's one of those moments where things just seem right. All the poets look happy, even when Cameron tries to shush them, which makes Charlie just clap louder. Charlie is being more Charlie-ish than usual tonight, but Neil pretends he doesn't notice. He just focuses on the company.

After that, they all eat cake. There's no singing, as promised, but everyone does go out of their way to wish Todd a happy birthday which makes him turn crimson all over again. Charlie keeps complaining because Neil got vanilla cake instead of chocolate, which makes him sound about seven years old, but it's honestly rather funny.

"Todd's a vanilla type," Neil defends, laughing.

Charlie steals some icing off the side of the cake and does another classic wink. "Shame."

Neil throws the item closest to him-which happens to be one of Knox's shoes-at Charlie. Charlie throws the shoe at Knox, even though he wasn't even a part of the conversation, but Knox doesn't throw it back. He just raises an eyebrow at Charlie and asks, voice quiet and exasperated:

"Why?"

There's another one of those loaded stares between Knox and Charlie.

Jesus Christ, Neil thinks. *Please tell me Todd and I weren't this bad; this is fucking agonizing.*

The rest of the evening is wonderful. Neil laughs harder than he has in a long time and Todd, even when embarrassed, never stops smiling. Neil doesn't drink much and notices Todd doesn't either, but Charlie somehow ends up getting shit-faced. (With wine, Neil feels like that's really more trouble than it's worth; both he and Charlie have found that for them wine is the hardest thing to get drunk on.)

But, eventually, Meeks and Pitts have to head back; that's what finally ends the golden night.

Neil raises his eyebrows."Why the hell are you guys driving back at 2 am?"

"It's only like 1:30," Cameron comments. Everyone ignores him.

"It's supposed to start snowing really heavily all day tomorrow, and we need to be back by Monday for classes. It's probably going to snow tonight but it's supposed to be pretty light until them," Meeks says, pulling on his jacket. He's a little wobbly from alcohol and Neil thanks Pitts mentally for not drinking tonight.

"Damn."

“We’ll be back soon,” Pitts assures, and he and Meeks wish everyone a proper goodnight.

Neil smiles at them. “Well, Todd and I can walk you guys out.”

Todd nods in agreement. Charlie sends a non-subtle wink that luckily only Neil catches, but he can’t help but smile back; since Charlie’s drunk, his wink is awkward, more like an overdramatic blink. He’s heavily relying on Knox to stay standing.

Neil and Todd wish them and Cameron goodnight so that they can get to bed, and then they walk Meeks and Pitts out to their car. It’s already snowing lightly as Meeks said it might, and they discuss holiday plans on the walk out. Neil avoids talking about his plans; he doesn’t want to bring the weight of his father to a happy occasion.

“Well, we’ll see you guys soon?” Neil re-confirms once they finally reach the place where Pitts and Meeks are parked.

“Of course,” Pitts says. He and Meeks wish Todd happy birthday one last time before they get in the car. Neil and Todd stand there for a moment, watching the tail lights of Pitt’s car disappear, and then they head back towards the dorm. The two of them are quiet. But it’s not an uncomfortable silence: it’s the kind of quiet that holds all the reasons why Neil loves Todd.

Neil’s cold; he accidentally left both his jacket and coat inside. He finds Todd’s fingers and despite the cold, Todd’s hands are warm; Todd fits his fingers in the spaces between Neil’s as they work their way back through the snow.

The snow isn’t too heavy; it’s just steady and cold, but the only part that really matters to Neil is how pretty Todd looks with snowflakes stuck in his hair and clinging to his eyelashes. Todd. His boyfriend. Neil’s beautiful boyfriend with snow sprinkling his features like freckles and a small smile on his lips; Neil can tell his eyelids are the slightest bit heavy from after-party exhaustion.

They’re just walking around the dorm building when Neil stops.

“Wait, Todd,” Neil says right before Todd goes around the corner.

Todd turns back to Neil. “Yeah?”

` He takes a good moment to look at Todd and grin.

Neil can't find the right words to express what he's feeling for Todd in this moment; even though he's good at speaking well and loudly, he specializes in memorization and histrionics, not stringing his own syllables together in beautiful ways. He wishes he was the kind of person who could give Todd poetry and prose, but he just can't write like that, let alone talk like that; (Neil has always thought that Todd could probably talk like he writes if he wasn't so buried in anxiety all the time. The night Todd told Neil that Neil helps him breathe confirms the theory, Neil thinks.)

But Neil has always been more soliloquy than sonnet.

"What?" Todd asks, smiling back softly.

"You know what?"

"What?" Todd asks.

Even if Neil is terrible at making language stunning like Todd can, he can be sincere. Neil takes a deep breath. Even if he can't say things the exact way he's like too, Neil can still say something sweet.

Neil looks at Todd for one lovely moment, forever humbled by the phenomenon that is Todd Anderson, and just says simply: "Did you know, you have just— the *greatest* smile?"

And then he kisses Todd.

Maybe it wasn't the lead-up Neil had hoped for, he wishes he had something less basic to say, but now he's kissing Todd so that really doesn't fucking matter to him anymore. He knows that Todd wants to be kissed, that Todd has told Neil to feel free, but he is still somehow surprised when it hits him that Todd is kissing him back.

Todd Anderson is kissing him back.

Earlier when Todd had kissed Neil, it had been brief but still brought Neil's heart into his throat. But now, with a proper, full-on kiss, Neil feels like his heart is creating fireworks and exploding with a feeling of home Neil has never felt before.

Neil isn't sure how long he kisses Todd for. He doesn't know how long they're there, right outside of the dorm in the snow; he doesn't care about time. It doesn't matter that there's snowflakes that are freezing

as fuck on the back of his neck, because soon Todd's hand is there and Todd's fingers are so warm.

Then Todd pulls away suddenly. "Neil!"

Neil is so completely taken aback that he doesn't even know exactly how to respond to him. Todd looks around them, as it's just started snowing a bit harder, then back at Neil.

"You— you beautiful i-idiot, you're not wearing a coat."

"Oh, yeah," Neil says, letting out a relieved little laugh because that scared the shit out of him. Todd seems to be taken aback by himself, as though his words were a bit stronger and a lot more abrupt than he intended because he's starting to blush, turning redder than he already is from the cold.

"Oh shit, sorry," Todd says, stuttering and apologetic. "I-I didn't mean to—"

Neil starts to laugh properly because he loves Todd and Todd is so sweet for getting that passionate about Neil not wearing a coat. He's laughing because he's so goddamn happy that Todd is his boyfriend and so glad that Todd's birthday was good. He's laughing because today has been so wonderful that it's like the bad parts of the last week have completely paled to the point that they're almost invisible.

And then Todd's laughing too. Neil's so in love with the way Todd laughs with everything in him; laughing is the one thing Todd does completely unguarded, completely unafraid of being judged. He's too happy to care. Neil smiles wider and they're both so sober on alcohol but so drunk on the energy between them.

"I really didn't mind the cold—" Neil says. Todd smiles back but he's turning even redder, if that's possible.

"Well I—" Todd says, and he shies away from Neil's gaze. "I can't kiss you if you freeze to death."

He takes Neil's hand again, quickly, as though he's worried that if he does it too slowly, Neil will see what he's doing and pull away or something. But *not* holding Todd's hand is one of the last things in the world Neil wants to be doing right now.

After they get back to their dorm, Todd takes his jacket off and Neil goes to make sure his phone is still asleep and then tucks it deep in

the drawer of his desk so even if it somehow found a way to miraculously turn on, he wouldn't hear it.

"Okay, it was kind of fucking cold," Neil admits as he turns back around to talk to Todd, who's already sitting on Neil's bed; he's got the new poetry books in his lap.

"Hey," Neil says, coming up to the side of his bed to look at Todd.

"Hey," Todd says. Then his voice gets softer. "You don't mind, do you?"

Neil shakes his head quickly. "Of course not. I like having you here; I was just going to ask if you'd rather— we can sleep in your bed, if you'd like."

Todd smiles but shakes his head.

"I prefer yours," he says, voice so tiny it's basically a whisper. Neil leans down to kiss the top of his head.

There's still leftover bottles of wine from the party that Knox left in their room after they left, and before Neil sits down he grabs one from where they're sitting on Neil's desk; Neil raises his eyebrows at Todd in question, and Todd smiles and nods his answer. They pour the wine into two of the mugs Todd keeps in their dorm (usually for tea).

Neil sets the drinks down beside the bed so as not to spill them when he collapses next to Todd. He lays next to where Todd sits, and pulls Todd down for a kiss; he can feel Todd smile into it.

"Todd?" Neil asks when Todd pulls away to catch a breath.

"Hmm?"

"Happy birthday," he grins. Todd smiles and leans down to kiss Neil again. Neil has never seen Todd smile so widely in response to a comment about his birthday.

Neil and Todd both drink and take turns reading out poems in the books Neil got for Todd, but they keep getting distracted; after Neil reads Todd Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, Todd won't stop kissing him. No matter what poem Todd reads, Neil can't stop himself from tenderly touching Todd's face or running his fingers through Todd's hair. At around 3 am, Neil finally turns off the lights. But neither of them sleep. They're all wandering hands and puffy, wine-stained lips

and softly whispered compliments. The compliments are the kind books and movies would call sweet nothings, but Neil has never liked that phrase; he knows what it means, but the term makes it sound like the things he says to Todd hold so much less meaning then they do. It makes this love he feels for Todd sound too shallow.

That night with Todd, there are no sweet nothings.

It's a night of sweet somethings. A night of sweet everythings.

Chapter End Notes

> anyway, this chapter was brought to you by the blessed vision of Todd in mom jeans.
> please remember to leave kudos & that comments are greatly appreciated!

December

Chapter Summary

things are going pretty well,,, too well

Chapter Notes

hi all!
i think i've just kind of decided to say "fuck it" to the whole "having a specific day i update" thing. so here's chapter nine! i really hope you all like this one.
i also have made an official "speak low" playlist that is just full of bops that give me the vibes of this fic. i normally write to it! if you want to check it out, here's the link: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/767Nw7Qt4au6ravQptUWmB?si=P6wFN4tPRFW9EZCPiTpZ6A

now, another shoutout to my beta buddy @aml13 ! they are an actual angel and have been super rad in giving me encouragement and letting me rant about my fic on facetime, in addition to proof reading my fic. they are an actual icon, so much appreciation to that beta-bro! i could not do this without them!!
i hope you all enjoy this anderperry-full chapter <3
xx,
auxctor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil is starting to see Charlie's point: it's very hard to be in a proper relationship with Todd when they're all completely swamped in exams. That's not to say they aren't being a couple; they still study together and try to get a little something to eat between classes or library visits and they both sleep in Neil's bed now. They do manage to fit in at least a bit of making out into their busy schedules. (Neil wasn't sure if Todd was the spend-an-hour-intensely-making-out type, but as it turns out, Todd very much is. He sometimes forgets that his beautiful, anxious Todd is just another nineteen-year-old boy when it comes down to it. And Neil is extremely okay with that.) Neil does wish they could find time to go on a proper goddamn date or something because he wants to be sweet, but that's not to say he doesn't love this. Any moment with Todd is a golden one.

They've got two more weeks of school before winter break. Neil's

already done one of his exams and Todd's done two, but they're still two weeks of exams away from freedom. Or well—

Freedom for Todd. Condemnation for Neil. Todd's staying in the dorms for winter break, and Neil knows he's both excited and relieved about that situation. But Neil can also tell Todd is trying to stay humble with his excitement of getting freedom on his winter break for Neil's sake. Todd knows that Neil doesn't have the same luxury.

Honestly, Todd doesn't need to do that, but a part of Neil is grateful.

His father keeps sending him texts asking about how exams are going and making sure Neil is studying. However much Neil studies, he tells his father double, and even then his father is rarely satisfied. His father is a blood-thirsty animal that can't be sated.

However, despite the impending Christmas and the amount of time Neil and Todd can actually spend time together being not ideal, Neil still feels okay. His depression has been an obedient creature recently, and Neil is thankful; he's terrified of having an episode during these two weeks.

But, as it turns out, in the moment he doesn't need to worry about himself. It's Todd who struggles first.

"It feels weird when you're older than me, I don't like it," Neil is saying as he highlights the definition of mitosis in his notes. He's sitting on his bed with notes and a textbook out in front of him, but he looks up to where Todd is across the room, sitting at his desk, scrolling through some essay on his computer.

This makes Todd laugh, but his laugh is just a little bit wrong. "We're not even five months apart."

"I know but still. It was even weirder though when you were eighteen and I was still seventeen."

Todd just kind of hums his response, some type of answer.

"Hey, Todd, sweetheart, you okay?"

Todd looks like he's about to brush it off but then he just sighs. "No. N-not really."

Normally Neil has to work to get these things out of Todd and he feels glad that Todd isn't holding it all back.

“What’s up?” Neil closes his textbook and pushes that and his notes off to the side, and then just tips his head in a slight *you can come over here* gesture. Todd does.

“I-It’s really doesn’t matter,” Todd says as he settles down next to Neil.

“No, it does matter.”

“ ‘M just anxious. Like always.”

Neil looks at him, eyebrows sewed together with worry. “Is the anxiety getting worse?”

“I think so,” Todd says simply.

“What can I do?”

Todd sighs. “Nothing really.”

Todd is quiet for a long moment; he’s the next to speak. “I hate this.”

“Hate what?” Neil isn’t sure what part of this he’s referring to.

“I hate *this* ; feeling anxious all the goddamn time.”

There’s something abnormally upset in Todd’s eyes.

“Todd—“

“It’s just— so stupid. I feel so stupid. There’s no reason to be anxious. There’s no reason for me to feel like this.”

Neil just watches him for a moment; he’s seen Todd anxious, but he doesn’t know exactly what this reaction is. It’s foreign territory.Todd doesn’t normally get this frustrated with himself. “With anxiety, there doesn’t have to be a—”

“I know, I-I know but that doesn’t help. It doesn’t make me any less anxious.”

Neil nods; he knows what Todd means. When he’s depressed, the fact that he “doesn’t need a reason” is no comfort.

Todd just sits there, staring off somewhere that Neil can’t find him.

“Have you reconsidered trying to see a therapist or a psychiatrist or something? See if that helps?” Neil asks. This is a conversation they’ve

had before; Neil has never minded much having to see a therapist or getting medication, but something about the idea greatly bothers Todd.

“It won’t help.”

“Didn’t you say you saw one a few times when you were younger—” Neil starts. Todd has always said that his parents took him to a therapist a few times when he was a kid; he’s told Neil that his parents cared until he was about eight. He says then is when they realized that Jeffery was talented and Todd was some kind of lost cause.

“Yeah, but it wasn’t helpful. All they told me was that I have generalized anxiety and social anxiety; like *thanks for that ground-breaking insight* . Would never have guessed.”

Neil decides it’s best to drop it. “Well, I’m here for you.”

“I hate this. I hate that I’m like this,” Todd says, voice cracking. It’s quiet for a long time when Todd speaks again.

“I hate myself.”

Neil doesn’t tell him not to. He doesn’ tell Todd to not say that. Neil doesn’t try to pick apart Todd’s bones and clean out the self-hate in between because he knows what it’s like to hate yourself. He knows there’s nothing he can say right now to make it better even though Todd’s self-hate cuts Neil deep too, so he just asks:

"Todd— what happened?"

There has to be more to this. This anger and self-hate isn't just coming from nowhere; something’s brought it to the surface.

Todd takes his face out of his hands and leans into Neil. "Jeffery called the other day and I was planning just staying here over Christmas, right? And I-I still am but— they're all going on vacation. And I wasn't even invited. My parents haven’t called me at all since I left; they didn’t even text me about my birthday. Complete radio silence; I-I mean, why would they waste their time on me?"

Neil is quiet as Todd clearly isn’t finished, but he takes Todd’s hand in his.

"And I have— my final in my English course tomorrow and it’s a fucking Socratic seminar which means that I-I-I’ll be speaking in front

of the whole class. And I can't do it and I hate that I can't."

Neil just listens. Todd buries his face in Neil's shoulder.

"I just can't do it, Neil."

Neil wraps an arm around him. "No, no. You can do this, it's going to be excellent. You're so insightful and I'm sure you'll do great."

There are tears in Todd's eyes. "Neil, I appreciate it but I-I just need to accept the fact I'm going to fail this class— I'm already on thin ice since I bombed that presentation. It's fine, 'll retake it next semester."

But it's clearly not fine; Todd's breath is starting to get faster.

"Todd, no. No. We'll figure this out—"

"I can't do it."

"Maybe if we practice—"

"Neil, I adore you, I really fucking do. And I-I adore your constant optimism, but the anxiety is like your depression; you just can't get out of bed some days. I can't get up in front of a class. I just can't. That's what I mean when I say I-I can't, and I'm sorry but no amount of positivity is going to make a difference."

Neil nods. He's trying to understand; as much as he knows about mental illness, there are parts of him that struggle to understand Todd's anxiety since Neil's never been afraid of talking in front of people, no matter how great the crowd or high the stakes.

The next thing Todd says is a whisper.

"I just don't want to feel like this anymore."

The quiet sits between them, but Neil pushes it out of the way to kiss Todd's forehead.

"I know you don't."

Neil tries to think of a solution. He knows he doesn't need to fix it but he wants to; he wants to give Todd something to lean on.

Neil looks over to him. "Did you ever talk to your professor about that presentation?"

“Well—” Todd looks at his hand. “No. I-I didn’t want to make an idiot of myself. I doubt she— I doubt she’ll let me do that.”

“Maybe just try to talk to her about this. See what she says.”

Todd starts to protest.

“You don’t have to,” Neil says, “ but that’s my advice. I could come with you if you wanted me to.”

Todd just looks at Neil, eyes heavy with appreciation and affection. He’s about to say something, maybe to thank Neil, but Neil just shakes his head and presses a careful finger to Todd’s lips. Todd doesn’t need to thank him. There are a few quick kisses exchanged, and then Todd answers;

“Okay. Okay— I’ll try to talk to her.”

He and Neil end up bullet-pointing the things he’ll say to his professor on a little index card, so that he’ll have something to consult when he inevitably loses all his good points to the pressure.

“And,” Neil says once they’re done. “ I know it’s not much consolation, but I like you. A lot. I know your anxiety makes you feel like not enough but you’re always enough; especially for me.”

Todd smiles slightly and sweetly. “Trust me, i-it’s a big deal. It’s not some sort of— consolation prize like you seem to think.”

“Good,” Neil says quietly like he already was well aware that was the case, but truthfully Todd telling him is a confirmation Neil didn’t know he needed.

“You’re—“ Todd looks over at Neil. “The best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Neil kisses him. It becomes a long, soft moment; he runs steady fingers through Todd’s hair and Todd kisses him back, and Neil can’t stop being surprised that this is something he can just *do* , that he can just kiss Todd whenever he wants. He just can’t believe Todd likes him back, even after almost a month of being together. And every day he falls in love with Todd all over again. Neil can’t stop falling in love with the person who makes everything make sense; the one person who makes Neil feel like everything he’s ever done has been leading him here.

It’s later when Todd asks. "Do you ever just get— so tired of your parents thinking you're a disappointment? Because there comes a point where I-I can’t help but internalize it. I wanted not to care. But I did. And I-I do.”

“Yes.” Neil says honestly. They’ve started to settle in Neil’s bed for the night. “All the time.”

Todd looks frustrated. “I just— I-I’m never going to be good enough for them. And it sucks.”

There’s a pause. Neil takes Todd’s hand and traces the lines in Todd’s palm. But then he starts to smile.

“What?” Todd asks.

“You and I are one pretty disappointing pair, aren’t we?” Neil grins softly.

This makes Todd smile back at him. “We really are.”

“The worst,” Neil says and kisses Todd.

“Absolutely,” Todd says when he pulls away to take a deep breath, and Neil notices that Todd’s eyes are glossy. Neil’s a little teary because there’s something so sharp about being unloved by parents that makes the softness between him and his boyfriend both wonderful and overwhelming. Just like it was the night they got together; but they’re both laughing too this time. Being in love with Todd makes Neil feel good enough.

When the hour gets late, Neil can’t sleep; he’s got his biology exam tomorrow. He’s been laying here for a good forty-five minutes, staring at the ceiling, mind wandering. Todd’s curled into his side, and Neil is pretty sure he’s asleep until he feels Todd shift next to him.

“Todd, are you okay?” Neil asks

Todd pauses for a moment, and presses a kiss to Neil’s shoulder. “I can’t sleep.”

“Me neither. Thinking about exams?”

“Yes.”

Neil thinks for a minute and then starts to get up.

“Where are you going?” Todd asks and he sounds so disappointed that Neil has gotten out of bed that Neil feels both badly and even more in love.

“No, you’re coming with me; we’re going to do something.”

“What’d you mean?”

Neil pulls a jacket over his shirt. “You can’t sleep. I probably won’t be able to either because of my biology exam. So let's go adventure somewhere.”

Todd gives a smile. “Where are we going at 2 am?”

“No clue,” Neil says. He holds out a hand to pull Todd to his feet, kissing Todd quickly.

They end up just walking around for a while. The place where campus ends, past the football field, is where the trees begin. There’s not too many, but they cover the hillside that resides there. But if you go to the top, you can see a small portion of the campus. Mostly just bright lights from clubs and Targets, but it’s the kind of place that people would sit on the ledge of and overlook the big city if the hill had a ledge or they lived in a big city.

“Neil, this i-is literally how horror movies start,” Todd says as they start up the side of the hill. The trees block out a bit of the light, so Neil can admit that it seems slightly-murdery.

“We’ll be okay!”

“Watch us get murdered.”

“We won’t get murdered,” Neil says. “Probably.”

This makes Todd laugh. “Thanks— that’s comforting.”

“If anyone tries to murder us… I’ll fight them.”

Todd lets out a scoff of a laugh and then tries to turn it to a cough so it sounds like he wasn’t regarding the idea of Neil fighting someone as implausible and completely ridiculous. “Sure you will.”

Neil feigns offense. “I could!”

“Okay,” Todd says, clearly unconvinced.

Neil's going to argue that he could fight whoever he'd like but then Todd kisses him and his arguing skills are compromised.

"You're saying all this like us and the poets haven't wandered through the woods in the middle of the night multiple times," Neil mumbles against Todd's lips.

"Be quiet," Todd says, slightly stuttering, but Neil can feel Todd smile.

They eventually make it to the top, and try to find the exact spot to settle. If you sit in just the right place, you can see the whole campus, lit up between the trees like a painting framed in pine. They watch late night cars flash by like loud, slightly drunk lightning bugs and listen to the bumble of people who don't give a shit about Monday enjoying their Sunday night. That's where Neil and Todd sit, on the cold grass.

There's something about the early hours in the morning that makes everything so surreal and heavenly. Even though it's chilly and dark, it feels like some sort of dreamy liminal space.

"Shit, it's cold," Todd says. Neil tries to offer his coat but Todd won't take it. It hasn't snowed in weeks and they're quite lucky the snow has melted for a bit, so the ground may be freezing but it's still fine to sit on. Conversation is quiet, and Neil keeps both of Todd's hands in his to try and keep him warm. Over time, they fall back to rest on their elbows, practically laying on the grounds, looking at the sky. They're no longer holding hands but they are close enough that Neil doesn't care.

"That one's Orion's belt," Todd says, pointing to stars that Neil can't see well because he's not wearing his contacts and his glasses have fallen low on his nose.

"Really?"

"I-I have no clue," Todd says softly, smiling shyly at him, which makes Neil laugh. "I'm actually taking an astronomy class next semester to fufill a science credit but— presently, I know fuck-all about stars. I-I thought it would be romantic if I did, though."

" *Fuck-all* ?"

"Yes! That's a thing people say. Right?" Todd asks.

"No, no, it is. I just haven't heard you say it before; it's a very Charlie

thing to say .Or a Knox thing. I don't know, they've now been living with each other long enough they're starting to say things the same exact way. Knox has started talking more and more like Charlie, have you noticed that?"

Todd thinks for a moment, considering. He responds with a different question.

"Do you think Charlie and Knox are going to get together?"

Neil lets out a half-laugh, half exasperated noise. "So I'm not the only one who sees it?!"

Todd grins. "No, they're not very— subtle."

"Well, Charlie's told me absolutely nothing. Has Knox told you anything?"

"Well—" Todd hesitates. "Kind of. Yes? Charlie really hasn't told you anything?"

"What?!" Neil sits upright. The grass was starting to grow uncomfortably itchy on the back of his neck anyway. "What's going on between them?"

Todd bites his lip, looking conflicted. "I've kind of been— *sworn to secrecy* ."

"Why??"

"There's one part that I think Charlie should tell you and the other part, I-I know Knox doesn't want you to know because you're going to tell Charlie."

"I can keep a secret!" Neil defends. He thinks it's sweet that Todd's keeping his word.

"Just like you can totally fight someone," Todd says.

Neil puts his hand over his heart like he's been deeply wounded. "I kept my feelings for you a secret for almost a year."

"Well— didn't literally all the poets know?"

"Do you have to expose me like that?" Neil does another over-dramatic *you've offended my sensibilities* look.

“I-I’m sorry,” Todd says, but his apology is legitimate. Suddenly his features are covered in guilt.

“Love. Todd. No. I’m joking with you,” Neil says, and then his voice sinks to something lower and sweeter. “Sorry; I shouldn’t joke like that when you’re anxious.”

“No, no. It’s alright just— I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Of course not,” Neil says, kissing him on the forehead and he can feel Todd starting to shake a bit. “Are you okay?”

Neil can see Todd’s starting to shake a bit.

“Yeah. Yeah. Just still off tonight.”

“That’s okay Todd. You can feel off.; just know I’m here. I’ve always got your back.”

Todd’s lips are careful on the words. “Thank you, Neil.”

“Of course,” Neil says. And then he kisses Todd. They’re there for a while, just late-night kisses in the dark, neon lights and flashing world in the distance.

Eventually, the night cold bites too deeply, and Neil and Todd head back down the hill.

They wander down the paths, back to where they came from, and eventually decide to drive to the other side of campus to get food. They end up just getting shitty fast food burgers but anywhere with Todd is wonderful, and sometimes for Neil seeing Todd smile is a sweet synonym for relief. Everything’s okay when he’s got this beautiful boy in his line of sight, who’s looking at Neil like he’s someone worth loving.

They don’t eat in the restaurant; they turn on the heat in Neil’s car and just sit in the parking lot. Eating and talking and just generally trying to forget about their respective exams tomorrow.

It’s only after a long silence after a lighthearted conversation about New Years plans (Neil is hoping to be back by then), that Neil finds it in him to trade some honesty in exchange for the things Todd confided in him earlier.

“Todd—” Neil says, and his voice is hoarse. He wants to admit one of the things he’s been terrified to say out loud. “I don’t know if I can handle Christmas with my dad.”

Todd stops halfway from taking a drink from his soda and looks over at Neil.

Neil just looks back at him; he’s at a loss. There are no words to explain this dread that runs through Neil’s bloodstream like an addictive but lethal drug.

“Can you— can you promise me you’ll at least stay safe?” Todd whispers. The sound of people talking outside, walking home from bars or clubs, is present but it’s so faded in this safe place. Todd takes both of Neil’s hands in his own, and looks at Neil, eyes full of worry.

Everywhere with Todd is a safe place.

Neil nods. “I promise.”

“You can call me at any time. Any hour,” Todd says seriously, lifting a hand to run a thumb over Neil’s cheek. They are both so skittish about the fact that it’s December again, almost exactly a year away from Neil’s suicide attempt, but Neil knows neither of them will admit it. “I- I don’t care if you wake me up, okay? I don’t care how late it is; I just need you to be safe.”

“I will,” Neil takes Todd’s hand away from his cheek just to bring it to his lips. “And I swear— I feel so much better than I did last year, okay? I’m doing well.”

“You are,” Todd agrees, a grateful little smile on his face. “You really are.”

Things may not be perfect but Todd is gentle in a way that reminds Neil that the world does offer second chances.

Neil thinks he passed his biology exam, but he’s so fucking exhausted from the mental work and the lack of sleep that even though Todd’s gone, Neil takes a nap. Neil misses Todd and hasn’t slept alone in about a month, so he takes Todd’s pillow off his own bed (since Todd sleeps there nearly every night) and collapses into Todd’s bed. He’s asleep almost as soon as his head hits the pillow.

He's not sure exactly how long he sleeps or how long Todd is gone, all he knows is that at some point, when it's still light outside, he wakes up slightly as he feels someone sit at the foot of the bed.

"Todd?" He asks, voice scratchy in his half-asleep state.

"Yeah." He hears Todd's forever warm voice. "It's me."

Neil still hasn't opened his eyes, so he just motions in Todd. "Com'ere."

"One sec," Todd says, and then after a minute or two, Neil feels a kiss on his wrist.

"Did everything go okay?" Neil asks, finally starting to wake up a bit.

"Yeah. Yeah— actually," Todd starts. Neil feels Todd settle next to him, and he opens his eyes to find himself looking directly into Todd's blue ones, and Neil immediately feels himself smile. Todd looks tired but overall calm. Overall— steady.

"So, what happened?" Neil says. He still sounds different from the bits of sleep that haven't faded yet, but Todd's smiling.

"She actually understood. "

"Your professor?"

Todd nods, and kisses Neil. When Neil pulls away, he's smiling. "What was that for?"

"For you being— brilliant. For telling me to ask."

"Of course; you shouldn't need to fail a class you're good at just because of your anxiety."

Todd kisses Neil once more before going on. "She says— she says they don't normally do exceptions on things like this, but I think my freak out back when I gave the presentation kind of— made her understand. Because I did all the work then just had that complete breakdown when it was time to present."

"How're you going to make up your exam?"

"Already did. I-I stayed for about an hour after class and discussed the seminar questions with her; I wasn't perfect, but one-on-one really helped."

“That’s excellent,” Neil grins. They’re close enough that their knees are touching, both laying on their sides, facing each other. Neil can see every plane of Todd’s face perfectly. He has an eyelash that’s fallen on his cheek and Neil swipes it away with his finger.

“And she said—” Todd tells him. “They actually do accommodations for students with anxiety here but— I’d just need a therapist letter or something.”

Neil looks at him, not knowing if Todd means that as a good or bad thing. He’s still slow with sleep but he kisses each little feature in Todd’s face. Todd seems to completely calm after that, and after a long moment, his lips move to form words.

“Just— thank you,” Todd tells him.

“For what?”

Todd is shy with his answer. “For telling me to advocate for myself.”

“It’s nothing,” Neil says and it’s true. He thinks for a moment.

“Sometimes,” Neil adds, looking at Todd. He pauses for a moment before finishing his thought.

“We just need to find it in us to ask for what we want.”

Neil kisses Todd again. Their legs tangle and his arms find Todd’s waist and Todd looks so relaxed, like nothing could make him feel anxious ever again.

And in that moment, it seems like things might be alright after all.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so so much for sticking with me this far. i'm so so honored that you all are reading and i hope you are loving reading this as much as i am writing it.
please remember to leave kudos and comments <3

This Is What Happens

Chapter Summary

in which Neil decides to ask for what he wants

Chapter Notes

i apologize in advance.
much love,
auxctor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil knows it's a bad idea. But after his talk with Todd, he feels as though he owes it to both Todd and himself to do what he's been afraid of.

"Hello, sir."

Asking for what he wants.

"Hello, Neil. I hope you're studying hard?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, Sir." Neil's trying his best to pour on the politeness; the last thing he needs to do is make his father upset right now.

"Now, why did you need to call?"

Neil's heart drops in the pit of his stomach. He can do this. He can do this.

"Actually, sir— I actually wanted to talk to you about something." Neil's tired. It's been a rough week; it's Friday now, he hasn't slept well since his nap on Monday, and he feels like absolute shit.

"And?" His father urges, clearly already annoyed with Neil's mere existence.

"I wanted to ask if I could stay in the dorms this holiday break."

Neil is nervous for a response and already exhausted from not only the lack of sleep, but also the depression that has decided to pay him a visit. He started getting depressed on Wednesday, Todd's anxiety completely sky-rocketed on Thursday, and it's all been downhill from there. Neil cannot stress enough how truly shit his week has been.

But that just makes him need this so much more; he needs a win. Both he and Todd need this win.

“Didn’t I already tell you your mother and I want you home for Christmas?” His father asks, voice sharp already.

“Yes sir, yes you did. But it’s extremely important to me that I spend this one at school. I was thinking I could come during the summer for extra time. It’s just that I’ve already paid to stay over winter break and I’d really like to stay with my friends.”

“Which friends?”

Neil should have known his Dad would ask who he needed to stay on campus for. But he has no lie prepared so, for once, he opts for the truth.

“Just Todd.”

It’s the wrong answer.

“Todd Anderson?” His father asks. There’s something nauseating in the the disgusted way his father says his boyfriend’s name.

“Yes sir. His parents aren’t letting him come home for Christmas and I don’t want to leave him alone.”

“I thought I told you no more with Charles Dalton and Todd Anderson.”

“I know, I’m sorry sir. Just Todd goes here too and—“

“Todd Anderson goes to Harvard?”

God this lie was so fucking stupid; he’s in so deep. “Yes sir.”

His father laughs. *Laughs* . “I’d always thought Todd wasn’t very bright.”

“Dad!” Neil says, anger rising in his throat like bile. He’s about to defend Todd and tell his father Todd is absolutely brilliant, just too shy to show it to some, but his father goes on, still laughing from the “idiotic” idea of Todd Anderson being a Harvard student. The only people Mr. Perry has listened to about what kind of person Todd is are Todd’s parents.

“No, Neil. You’re coming home for Christmas.”

“No, Dad—”

“What’s so goddamn important about Todd An—” His father starts, sounding angry now. But Neil is too; his father can say whatever he goddamn pleases about Neil, but not about Todd. Especially when Neil’s so sick of never being able to inhale around his father; the words just slip out.

“Because he’s my boyfriend!”

His father goes dead silent. Neil is surprised by himself too; anger suddenly flushes away and is replaced with dread.

Fuck fuck fuckity fuck.

This is what happens when you haven’t slept in a week. This is what happens when your brain is scrambled with depression. This is what happens when you’re in love and angry and so sick of being stomped into the ground by your father.

“Your— *what* ?” His father says, voice dangerously quiet.

“My—” Neil loses courage and the word for Todd dies on his lips. Dies on the lips that have kissed Todd’s so many times. “Nothing.”

“Your *boyfriend* ?” His father sounds appalled. Disgusted. Sick at the very idea of a boy loving his son.

“No, no—” Neil tries to take it back. He wants to take it back. Neil would give anything to take it back because for once, Todd is his shame, not his pride.

He feels ashamed for the fact that he feels ashamed by Todd.

And then his father erupts into laughter again. This sick, cruel, I-brought-you-into-this-world-and-I-can-take-you-out-of-it laugh.

“You’re really making me go through this again? You’re really making me deal with your ridiculous, made-up drama again? These desperate cries for attention—”

Neil’s started to cry. He can’t help it. In a matter of ten minutes, this has all gone so horribly wrong. He had been pacing, but he stops momentarily to lean against the windowsill. He feels dizzy.

“Oh come on,” his father sneers. “Don’t try and manipulate me by crying; that’s pathetic. I’m not going to feel sorry for you, Neil. You’re making this silly drama where there doesn’t need to be any.”

Neil’s lost it; the fight in him. The confidence that makes Neil who he is. Everything from this year that his father has said is trapped under Neil’s skin and he can feel it curdling like sour milk.

“I’m sorry,” Neil says. “I’m so sorry.“

And then the yelling begins. He tells Neil how shitty this is of Neil to try and ruin Christmas. He tells Neil how *dirty* being a *homosexual* is and how Neil needs to grow up.

“Neil, you need to get over this *gay* phase. If you were a—”

Neil flinches when his father says the next word; he always feels shitty when people throw around that slur like it’s nothing but it’s a whole new level of sting and bite from his father.

“— then I’d rather not have a son at all.”

And then his father starts on Todd. If Neil’s father is generous with gay slurs when it comes to Neil, he’s fucking charitable when it comes to Todd. Neil flinches at every one but he’s out of energy; he’s got nothing left to push back.

Not even for Todd.

His father says a lot of things Todd’s parents say about Todd; they met multiple times when Neil and Todd were still in high school, and have apparently talked more than Neil or Todd knew.

Todd is useless. Todd is stupid. Todd is holding Neil back.

And then his father is back to telling Neil how awful and disgusting he is. Neil is ridiculously nauseous, and when he finally gets to speak, he almost can’t talk he's crying so hard. He can’t breathe. Is this what Todd feels like during a panic attack? He feels a new level of anger that this is something Todd has to do so constantly.

“I’ve gone to Harvard. I’ve tried to be straight. I don’t know what else you want from me.” Neil turns away from the window to pace again but he stops dead in his tracks. Todd is standing at the door; the door is shut behind him but he seems frozen in place, looking at Neil, trying to decipher what Neil’s said.

Shit.

Why the fuck can't Todd just knock? It's like Neil's admission of love all over again, except something much more bitter.

His father yells for a while, and the whole time Neil and Todd are just standing there, eyes locked. This isn't good. None of this is good.

Finally, finally, after what is probably a millennium in Neil's perfect hell, his father stops.

"Yes sir," Neil says to whatever furious tangent his father has been on.

"And Neil, one more thing."

Neil's going to throw up."Yes sir?"

"If you aren't home by Christmas and done with this silly gay thing, you're on your own. For good."

And his father hangs up.

Neil puts away his phone slowly, finally looking away from Todd. After a moment, Neil falls onto his bed and rubs his face. He's quiet for a moment. His father's voice is still ringing in his ears and he can't stop thinking about the confused expression on Todd's face.

"What?" Neil says, sitting up to look at Todd. Todd looks up at Neil; he's been staring at his hands, and has sat down on his bed.

On *his* bed. Not Neil's.

"I—" Todd says. "I didn't say anything."

"But you're thinking it."

Todd takes a deep breath; he looks stiff and uncomfortable in a way that's normally reserved for public speaking and crowded rooms. "I don't— I don't know what you want me to say. Just— Harvard?"

Neil immediately feels guilty; he's being rude. He's being unfair. "Yes, I told my dad I'm at Harvard."

"That's—" Todd starts.

"I know."

“How are you managing that? Neil, you know what happened last time you tried to keep something from him.”

Neil freezes. Todd doesn’t bring it up— ever.

Todd looks as surprised as Neil feels. “I just mean—“

“No, I get it; I know it’s stupid. But I’m mostly better now. If he finds out, I’m sure I’ll be—” Neil trails off because he doesn’t know what he’ll be if his dad finds out. He’s not sick anymore, not in the way he used to be, but even he knows that anything involving his dad is a game of Russian Roulette.

Neil suddenly feels sick to his stomach.

“What was I supposed to do?” His voice cracks on the words.

Todd doesn’t say anything for a long while, silence tight and uncomfortable between them.

Neil breaks the silence. “I just don’t know what else to do, okay?”

“I mean, Neil— you’re an adult. You don’t have to take this anymore,” Todd’s face has gone from confusion to an irritating softness; the kind that only Todd has. But if he’s soft for Neil, why isn’t he sitting here next to Neil? *He doesn’t get it.*

“What if he shows up here?” Neil’s response comes back quicker than he intends, voice broken but frustrated. He’s talking with his hands but his hand motions are frustrated and dizzying. “What if he shows up here and chews me out in front of everyone or makes me quit or some shit, like he tried to do with the play? What if he never leaves me alone? What if cuts me off; I can only do so much on scholarships and shitty jobs. Even if I fucking quit college, that doesn’t mean I have enough to live on.”

“You’ll be alright. You worked all senior year—”

The things Neil has been holding back spill over. “Yeah well— he has my money. It’s not mine anymore. Part of why I didn’t bother working this year.” He’s up and pacing now. He can feel Todd’s eyes on him, following him as he crosses their small dorm.

“I— I didn’t know that.”

Neil can’t stop. It’s building up, just like last time; everything his dad

has ever done is funneling into the fear.“ He’ll cut me off—”

“Is the money worth—,” Todd starts.

Something breaks.

“That’s fucking easy for you to say! Your parents may be shitty but at least they’re shitty and loaded.”

Todd recoils. He looks like Neil just hit him. Neil feels awful but anger is a strong and sour thing and Neil’s entire world is fragmenting. His father wants him home for Christmas but he can’t do that. Something in his chest burns and— he’s remembering.

He’s remembering what it feels like to want to be dead.

Because he knows Todd’s right; Neil knows someday this will blow up in his own face, and every day he waits the harder it is to tell his father. But who’s Todd to tell Neil that his father’s explosion is superior to walking on eggshells?

Telling his Dad is risking everything; including Todd. Doesn’t Todd know that?

“I—I—I” Todd can’t spit the words out.

“You don’t get it, Todd— you don’t get what it’s like. He still has my bank account. But it’s not just the money— that man will find any way he can to make my life a living hell. It doesn’t matter how much legal say he has over me— it doesn’t matter that I’m 18– he’ll screw it up. *Everything* .”

Todd just looks at Neil. He’s clearly digging, searching for the right thing to say back. But he seems to be coming up with nothing and Neil can’t seem to stop; all his worry is pouring out, pooling at both their feet.

“It’s not just about college either. The moment he finds out about this, we’ll be revisiting Neil and Thomas Perry’s *greatest hits*.” Neil puts heavy air quotes around the last words. “Because it will start with college and how I’m a disappointment and then we’ll end up at why me wanting to be an actor is a disappointment and then we’ll be reviewing why me being gay is a disappointment and just keep going through all the disappointing things his shitty son has ever fucking done— with my dad it never stops. It. Will. *Never* . Stop.”

Neil goes on. “He could force me into so many things, Todd; I wouldn’t be able to see any of you all again. I’ll have to go back home and get a nice *girl* friend and get ready for medical school. My life will never be mine again, Todd.”

There’s something upset in Todd’s features now; but not at Neil’s father— at *Neil.*

“Well, at least then you’d be able to date someone as smart as you. That would make your dad happy I-I’m sure.”

Todd must have heard at least part of what Neil’s father said about him; Neil’s heart is breaking.

“That’s not true, Todd. You know that’s not true. And that’s not fair of you to say— that’s just my Dad being an asshole.”

“I-I know. But your willing to do whatever your Dad says—”

“I only do it because I have to.” Neil says. He never knew Todd thought this way about him and it stings.

“How do I-I-I know that you’re not just going to break up with me once this gets too hard? Or once he tells you to break up with me—if he hasn’t already? Because your Dad isn’t going to go any easier on you about me.”

“Todd, I don’t care what he says,” Neil says. The anger has given away to sadness for just a moment; hurt that Todd would think he would break up with him. Just like that.

“But— you do! What else is all this? None of this would be happening if you— if you just *didn’t care* .”

They’re both on their feet now but Neil can’t say when Todd got up.

“Todd, where is this coming from?” Neil asks, half angry at how unfair Todd is being, half begging. “What the hell would I break up with you?

“The fact—“ Todd has to try again because he loses his breath. “The fact that your Dad just rattled off, in the most extreme way possible, every damn thing I-I-I hate about myself. The fact that you might start to see it too, Neil.”

They’re both tired. The stress of the week is too much and Neil is

angry at his father and depressed. And he knows Todd is angry at his own parents and is anxious. It's too much for them both to hold on their shoulders.

"What do you want me to do? My dad doesn't speak for me!"

Normally Neil would comfort Todd, but Neil's never been angry quite like this. He's never seen Todd angry quite like this.

"Just— you don't have to take this anymore, Neil. And I don't— I don't want you to think badly of me."

"You're telling me I should stand up to my Dad? You could barely talk to your professor, let alone a parent!"

Todd tries to say something but nothing comes out; he's clearly both anxious and red-hot from frustration. He tries again. "I never said— I never said it would — it won't be easy and I-I-I never said it would. And I wasn't—"

"My life will never be mine again," Neil repeats. His skin is prickling and he's never seen Todd's soft features so sharp and hurt and angry before.

Todd shakes his head and his words come out trembling but honest. "Has it ever been?"

That makes Neil angrier, because Todd's right. But this is too much. Neil is depressed. He's angry at his father for making the darkness infinite. He's angry at his mom for not protecting him. He's angry at Todd because Todd is right but he also doesn't understand what it feels like to have a father like Neil's and because Todd is taking Mr. Perry's words and putting them in Neil's mouth. That idea makes Neil feel sick.

But most of all, Neil's angry at himself.

Neil takes a sharp breath, and the room is dead silent as Todd's words still hang in the air. He needs to leave; he breaks the silence as he pulls on his coat.

"I need to—"

"Neil—"

"I need to think—"

“Neil!” Todd says, determined and frustrated and something else Neil doesn’t recognize. Neil looks back when Todd speaks next. “This i-isn’t what freedom looks like.”

It’s all too much. Neil doesn’t think before he responds.

“You don’t get it; my dad is brutal. At least yours doesn’t care.”

Todd gets this expression on his face that Neil has only seen him wear when he talks about his worst insecurities. What Neil said sinks until both of their skin; the comment sobers Neil for a moment. He fucked up. He fucked up big time.

“Todd—“

“Fuck o-off,” Todd snaps back, choking on the *o* . Stuttering but in his quiet, frustrated voice he wears when the fights get bad between him and Neil. But never as scathing as this.

Neil needs to leave; he needs to clear his head. He needs to go be angry at Todd, but even more so he needs to punish himself for treating Todd like this. Neil needs to destroy every part of himself for being unfair to Todd, the boy he loves, and being such a coward in the presence of his father. He needs to get out.

But Todd leaves before Neil can and Neil watches him go, feeling so dirty. He feels wrong and angry and bitter which are things he thinks he, Neil Perry, should never feel. Neil is going to explode with all of the things he feels in his chest; why did he ever try to think of himself as someone that should be wanted? Neil gets sick in their dorm trash can.

This is what happens when you try to lie.

Everything hurts. Fear runs sharp and hungry through his veins, anger is its vicious companion, and Neil is detestable. He is stupid and disappointing; he’s everything his father has been hammering into Neil for years. Neil’s father is right.

Neil is so unworthy.

Chapter End Notes

okay okay please don't hate me. i swear this all is going somewhere i had to do it to 'em.
please leave comments and kudos for more?
also SHOUTOUT TO THE LOVELY @alm13 for being a general icon and helping me every step of the way. literally could not do this without them!

Flaws In Logic

Chapter Summary

in which Neil and Charlie talk about their disastrous love lives, and Cameron needs advice

Chapter Notes

hi all!
so my apologies for the level of angst but IT HAS TO GET WORSE BEFORE IT GETS BETTER. i really appreciate all your feedback, and i'm super happy to hear you're enjoying.
also, i saw some of y'all talking about my fic on tumblr, and i might of lowkey cried because i was so flattered/ honored that you like my fic. sometimes, even with fanfiction, writing feels like just speaking your opinion into the void and it's good to know people are hearing my chaotic fanfics and with that, enjoying them.
and of course, much thanks to the lovely @aml13 for being the best beta bro and helping talk through this story and literally just being iconic. they are so so wonderful!
forever writing,
auxctor

p.s. IMPORTANT NOTE: please notice that the tag "mild sexual content" has been added. it's not for this chapter (though this chapter has some,,, conversations) , it's actually for a saucier-than-intended later chapter, but i just wanted to give you all a heads up. i will also let you know at the beginning of that chapter so if it's one you need to skip, you can!

p.p.s idk what the hell happened to the chapter formatting but it's a little wonky! i tried to fix it the best i could, but it won't fix in some places. i'm really sorry!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back during senior year, Neil had known he had feelings for Todd after exactly forty five days of knowing him. There were five parts to the realization; the very first five things that Neil loved about Todd. It went like this.

- **Todd could write.**

Mr. Keating had made Todd do a poem in front of their English class thirty days after Neil met Todd. Neil remembers the completely mortified look on Todd's face. He can still see Todd's unsure stance in front of the class when he closes his eyes, the shake of his body from nerves. Still, Neil can envision Todd freely spitting beautiful words, putting his heart on Keating's desk for the entire class to see.

It was the very first time Neil felt like he properly saw Todd for who he was. He could pair words in ways that made warmth spread through Neil's limbs and create metaphors that hit on his heart.

- **Todd was kind**

It was one of those things that it took a minute for Neil to see, as Todd's shyness always covered up his personality with heavy anxiety during first impressions. But once Neil invited Todd to start eating lunch with the poets and to come to poets meetings, Neil saw it. The ways that Todd did everything gingerly and with a kind of softness that was unfamiliar to Neil. Todd was precise with his kindness, careful and sweet, and he cut into Neil's heart like a surgeon whose hands steadied instead of shook.

- **Todd was shy but not uptight. He actually had a brilliant sense of humor.**

Some people would say Todd's shyness was a bad thing, but Neil never saw it like that. Shy was not a bad trait; it's just who Todd was, and still is. But it made Neil grin so widely the first time he saw Todd's shoulders relax and tell the poets a bad pun.

Yes, the very first joke Neil heard Todd tell was a *bad pun* .

But it was one of those jokes that was so goddamn stupid that he couldn't help but laugh. And the way Todd smiled— Neil would bring down the moon to see that smile right now.

- **Todd was understanding and a brilliant listener**

Todd was the first person who seemed to truly empathize when he saw Neil speak with his father. He seemed to be the only one who saw how much Neil's father broke Neil.

"Do you need to talk about it?" Todd had asked over video call the night after Neil's father yelled at him in the school parking lot about Lord knows what, about a month and a half before Neil's suicide attempt.

Neil had played dumb, not wanting Todd to see all the hell that lived in the pandora's box of Neil's mind and all the years of trauma that had filled it.

"Well," Todd has said. "I-I-I'm here if— if you ever want to talk."

And Neil could see in his eyes that he completely meant it.

- **Todd cared**

Todd cared. About Neil, The Poets, Keating, writing, literature. He cared so hard: he still cares. Neil has never seen someone care for him quite like Todd Anderson.

How could Neil not fall in love with him?

Presently, Todd hasn't slept in Neil's bed for four days.

Neil didn't realize until now how much he's come to rely on Todd's head on his chest and Todd's limbs tangled with his to help him sleep. His stupid, small dorm room bed feels lonely without Todd pressed to him, keeping Neil stable.

But now, when he can't sleep, he glances across the room to see Todd in his own bed, his back to Neil.

They aren't completely ignoring each other, but they both try to avoid their dorm as much as possible and their only exchanged interactions are things are along the lines of:

"Studying for your stats final tomorrow?"

"Yep."

"I'll— let you be, then."

Neil wants to make it better; he tries to find the place where he and Todd can meet halfway. But Neil doesn't deserve better. So he doesn't apologize; he lets himself and Todd do this awkward coexisting.

Luckily (or unluckily) it's Knox and Charlie who save the two of them from the constant, thick tension.

Neil's sitting at his desk, studying for what feels like the millionth day

in a row when there's a rapid knock at the door; at first, he thinks it's Todd because Todd's been out Lord knows where. But the knock is too sure of itself.

"Come in."

Neil turns around in his chair to find a very annoyed Knox in the doorway.

"Hey, what's up?"

"I need a favor," Knox says.

"What can I do for you?"

"Can you please go room with Charlie for a few days? I just need some space and I know you and Todd are fighting so it might help you guys have some time too."

Too? Neil thinks. "What happened with you and Charlie?"

Knox lets out a sigh. "I have no clue. Ask Charlie, and if you find out, please get back to me. I don't know what the hell I did."

"Okay. Yeah, no problem. My side of the room's all yours," Neil says, already starting to pack up his things. He hates how relieved he is that he won't have to see Todd on a daily basis this way.

"Thanks, you're a lifesaver."

Neil shakes his head. "It's no issue."

When Neil knocks on the door to Charlie and Knox's room, Charlie immediately lets Neil in, seeming relieved that it's not Knox.

"Hey— apparently I'm rooming with you for a few days?" Neil says. He sets his bag on the floor by Knox's desk.

"He was serious?" Charlie says. "Christ, Knox."

Neil immediately settles down on Knox's bed, not wasting time before asking questions. "What happened between you and Knox?"

Charlie just groans and throws himself on his bed in a dramatic manner that makes Neil laugh for the first time in days. "I don't fucking know."

“Come on,” Neil says, leaning forward with his elbows on his thighs, hand in palm. “There’s something going on between you two.”

They both know that Neil can tell and that there’s no use in Charlie lying.

“I guess— we’re something. Definitions don’t really matter to me,” Charlie says but Neil can easily tell from the way he glances at the door, that he’s bluffing. Charlie has been like this as long as Neil has known him; he’s so much more three-dimensional then he acts. Neil still takes pity and plays along.

“Oh, well— I don’t know but Knox seems like the kind of guy who would be bothered by the ‘not knowing what you are to each other’ kind of thing. What all has happened between you two? Is he your boyfriend or something like that?”

“No, he is *not* my boyfriend,” Charlie says emphatically. “We’re just something. Even if I wanted to date him— you know me; I’ve been a shit boyfriend with everyone I’ve dated,” Charlie says, giving Neil his smirky smile. But the smirk looks pained this time.

Neil has never seen Charlie like this.

“Charlie, seriously, what’s going on with you two?”

Charlie doesn’t even try to hide the fact that he’s evading the question. “Enough about that— what happened between you and Todd? “

Charlie’s eyebrows raise and Neil temporarily gives up on trying to confront Charlie about Knox. Neil is pretty sure that this is the kind of conversation that one’s eyebrows normally scrunch for but that’s a more serious facial expression and he thinks that this is about the most serious Charlie Dalton gets.

“It’s actually about my dad,” Neil answers honestly.

Charlie’s face goes bitter. “What the fuck did he do to you?”

“Nothing— well; I told him I’ve been attending Harvard—” Neil starts. Charlie looks surprised but listens from his place across from Neil, and Neil goes on as he recounts everything that’s gone down the past few months. He omits parts of the fight between him and Todd; Neil feels like a complete and utter dick for about 50% of the things he said.

“Well… shit.”

They’re both quiet for a while.

“What are you going to do?” Charlie asks.

“Absolutely no clue.”

They’re both quiet for a long time. And then out of nowhere, as though he’s decided those pieces of honesty from Neil deserve some sort of trade, Charlie looks over at Neil.

“Do you think Knox likes Todd?”

Neil can’t help but laugh; it takes him a moment to realize that Charlie is being completely serious.

“No, not at all,” Neil says. “They’re completely platonic; that would be like me and you dating.”

Charlie imitates throwing up.

“Exactly, it would be just plain weird. Plus Todd’s my..” Neil trails off; he doesn’t know exactly what Todd is to him at the moment. “Boyfriend. Was my boyfriend. Should be my boyfriend. I don’t know where we’re at.”

Charlie momentarily slips back to their former conversation. “What was so bad that you two aren’t talking? Did you guys fuck or something? Things always get complicated after that.”

“No Charlie, for the love of God, Todd and I haven’t fucked,” Neil says. “And in what relationship has fucking made things more complicated?"

Charlie very pointedly doesn’t make eye contact with Neil.

“Wait—no way,” Neil says, sitting up abruptly. "You and Knox--?"

“Well, yeah,” Charlie says, as though he’s surprised it took Neil this long to figure it out although it’s clear by the way that he won’t meet Neil’s eyes that he’s uncomfortable with this topic. “A few times.”

“Okay, Nuwanda, you need to explain what’s going on with you guys.”

And then, Charlie fills Neil in on everything he's been not talking

about.

“Okay so, Knox and I argue quite a bit, right?? We’ll be fine for like two weeks and then really have it out. Because Knox and I get on just fine, it’s the actual living together that’s the problem; the fights are always caused because my side of the room's always a mess or because I keep eating his snacks without asking. And so, about two months ago, right before the second poets meeting, we got into a really big fight; I don’t even remember what it was about. And he was frustrated with me and I was frustrated with him, and I don't know, he was wearing this stupid goddamn frown and — I just kind of kissed him. I don’t know, thought it might— solve the problem.”

Neil tries to hold back a smile; he fails, Todd temporarily gone from his thoughts. “How was kissing him supposed to solve the problem?”

“I don’t know! I don’t think things through. He just looked really annoyed at me and I hated the look he was giving me and so I kind of just kissed him to get him to stop looking at me like that.”

"Shit. How did he take that?"

"Well— he kissed me back. And then we didn’t talk about it."

"Oh boy," Neil says because "we didn't talk about it" is straight out of the ‘ *falling outs with your significant other’* handbook.

Charlie goes on. "And then a few days before Todd’s birthday we got in another really explosive fight, and then he kissed me. And we kind of ended up screwing around."

"Damn."

Charlie shrugs, as though this entire conversation is much more casual than it is. "And now every time we start to argue we just fuck and that solves the problem.”

“So your solution to every fight is just angry sex?” Neil is finding Charlie and Knox’s logic extremely flawed.

“I don't know, it's a distraction and it's hard to argue when you have a dick in your mouth."

That makes Neil laugh.

"And besides," Charlie says, "It’s not *angry* sex. It’s more— *mildly*

annoyed sex."

Neil raises his eyebrows, grinning. "Is it good mildly annoyed sex though?"

"Oh yeah, it's always 10/10, would fuck out of sheer annoyance again."

"Well— if that's working (for some reason), what lead to a fight that couldn't be solved by fucking, then?"

The proud smirk leaves his face immediately. "Knox told me he has feelings for me."

"And you got mad at him?"

"No. No. I just told him I don't like him back and we fought about something else."

"Charlie-- I hate to break this to you but-- I feel pretty comfortable saying that you do like him back."

Charlie looks annoyed but seems to be tired, and gives up on the *'none of this matters and I don't have feelings for Knox'* act. "Yeah— I know."

"Nuwanda, you're going to need to walk me through this."

Charlie sighs, hands going up in a defensive, exaggerated gesture. "I don't know! He said he has feelings for me and that scared the shit out of me so I just was like ' *haha sorry, I don't feel the same* .' But then today— Knox was just getting ready to go about his day and he looked so goddamn pretty and so— I started a fight with him."

"You started a fight with him because he's attractive?"

"Yes." Charlie looks confused as to why Neil isn't getting this.

"Charlie, you're a dumbass."

"I just— when he's being attractive and funny it's so much harder to pretend I feel platonic and that pissed me off."

"So you were trying to push him away?" Neil concludes for him, tucking a leg under himself to try and get more comfortable sitting on Knox's bed.

Charlie looks unusually and disconcertingly timid. "Yeah. I guess you

could say that."

"So he's not mad at you?"

"No, you know Knox, he doesn't really get angry; he just gets kind of fed up with me. And I'm realizing I'm not good at admitting I'm wrong."

"Really?" Neil raises his eyebrows at Charlie, not meaning to sound as *really, that's news to you?* as he does.

"Yes, yes, I know. It's very clear to everyone but me, I got that."

"No, I'm just surprised that you guys fight so much; I would have never guessed Knox could be a shitty roommate," Neil says, back to the premise that this conflict between Knox and Charlie started on.

"Oh, Knox is an amazing roommate," Charlie looks down at his lap. Neil has truly never seen him like this. "Knox isn't the problem."

Neil looks at him. "What do you mean?"

Charlie lets out a long sigh. "It's me who's hard to live with; I'm an awful roommate."

"I'm sure you're not—"

"No," Charlie says and— is that insecurity in Charlie Dalton's voice? "I'm a pain in the ass. I'm messy and loud and pick fights when I'm just a little annoyed."

What's making Charlie like this? Neil knows Charlie can get insecure but he hasn't heard him talk about it since they were both fifteen and hated themselves and Charlie still gave at least one fuck about what people thought of him. "Charlie—"

"I know you know this because we've been friends for ages," Charlie says. " But other people don't realize— I know how difficult I can be. I do."

"Charlie, you're not difficult—"

"Neil—" Charlie gives Neil a *don't bullshit me* look.

"Well, you can be kind of a dick but you're not difficult, Charlie. And anyways, that's one of the things we like about you."

Charlie nods. “I know, and I like being that person. But sometimes— I’m just really, truly shit when knowing if I’ve gone too far. Let’s take Cameron, for instance; I don’t always know when I stop being like *haha* mean to him and start to be *actually* mean; and then I’ll think about it, or one of you guys will say something and I’ll realize oh fuck, that was shitty of me. And I don’t think you even realize you do this, Neil but you’re the one who normally takes me down a peg; you don’t realize how helpful that is for me. Like, that time you were like ‘play nice Nuwanda’; that’s actually really helpful. I made one last comment and then Knox said something else so I assumed I must have gone much too far, so I apologized. Which I’m also really shit at.``

"Charlie, it's okay,” Neil tells him.

Charlie seems to have been holding this in his chest for too long. “And, I know Knox didn’t know me in high school but I don’t think anyone realizes— last year, even once you all told me I went too far, I didn’t do anything about it. So it may not be great, but I have been trying, and sometimes I wish someone would give me some goddamn credit. I’m really trying."

Neil feels guilty; no, he never noticed that Charlie has been trying harder but when he looks for it, he can see it. He's definitely equally chaotic but he is— less intense about it all.

Charlie sighs, "I’m trying so hard, even if it doesn’t look like it."

Neil looks at him with sincerity. "Charlie, I'm sorry. I didn't know you felt like this."

"No, I need to get better at talking about this kind of thing," Charlie says. "Because I like being this, it’s who I am but I also want to be the kind of guy who could—"

Long pause. Charlie takes a deep breath

"—have a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend, but you see my point; I don't want a girlfriend…” He trails off once more before continuing.

“I want Knox."

Neil looks at him for a long time. "Charlie, I know that humor is just how you deal but this is the side of yourself you should be letting Knox see. You can be emotional and real, you're just scared, but he doesn't know that. He won't know that you're trying to be better unless you tell him and then you show him. And Charlie if he said he

likes you, he likes you for everything you are. I know Knox and if he likes you, he likes you for what you are, not what you could be. He loves *you* , not some abstract idea of who you could become."

Charlie seems to let the words sink in and then he nods. "Yeah, yeah."

"You're my best friend and yes you're messy and loud and pick fights when you're just a little annoyed, but it's that that makes you fun and just about the funniest person I know."

That makes Charlie smile, but his voice comes out quiet which is never a word Neil thought he would use to describe Charlie's voice before. "It's just— Jesus, Neil, I've never felt like this before about anyone. I want to be better for him."

Only then does Neil realize the true deepness of Charlie's feelings for Knox.

"It's okay if you're not everything you want to be; none of us are," Neil says. " We're all still eighteen and nineteen and all we can do is our best."

Charlie nods.

"Neil, you're really good with the whole feelings thing, you know that? You were always so passionate about how much you love Todd, still are— and I'm just not like that; it doesn't come easily to me. And, Neil, you can cry. Do you know how insane it is to me that you can just express emotion? I just— I don't think you realize how good you are with people and feelings and all this shit."

"Thank you," Neil says. He has never thought this emotional part of himself was worth being appreciated for, let alone by Charlie Dalton. "But you can do this with Knox. I feel the same thing about wanting to be better; Todd makes me want to be everything I'm not good enough at now."

"Yeah, I guess." Charlie deflates. "I just know I'm going to royally fuck this whole thing up."

This makes Neil laugh. "Charlie, I can not express how deeply I feel that sentiment. I just can't believe how I managed to make things go to hell after only a month."

"Yeah— really, what's your plan?" Charlie asks, seeming relieved that the conversation's back to Neil.

"Jesus fuck, I don't even know. It's just— it's Todd; I know I'm only eighteen and so this is probably stupid, but Charlie; I'll love him forever, if he lets me. "

Charlie looks at Neil with this impressed and almost envious look. "You really love him, don't you?"

"Like I love warmth and water and oxygen."

This makes Charlie smile. "Then why don't you go makeup with him?"

"I said some things I shouldn't have. And he was really insecure that I'm going to break up with him because of what my Dad keeps saying. And I don't even know where to go from here."

"You could ask him to fuck."

"Why is that your solution to everything?" Neil laughs. He almost adds that it doesn't seem to be working out too well for Charlie and Knox, but he figures it's too soon.

"So, all jokes aside—" Charlie says, looking over at Neil. "Are you guys ever going to— y'know—"

He wiggles his eyebrows at Neil.

"I don't know. At some point, I'm assuming. Why do you ask?"

"No I don't know just— you've wanted to have sex with this boy for over a year, and I'm just genuinely curious."

"I mean, I want to; at some point. Hopefully in the near future, but we've been focusing on everything else recently; like you said, we haven't been doing many couple things because of exams. So we haven't really talked about it, I guess— haven't really had the time."

Charlie sighs, looking off to the doorway, and Neil thinks Charlie is probably imagining Knox walking out, presumably like he did earlier today. "Yeah— talking about it. That seems like a good idea."

"Are you going to talk to Knox?"

Charlie just doesn't answer. They both just sit there in the comfortable silence.

"Hey, Charlie?" Neil asks.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for listening to everything and— when you have things to talk about, I’ve got you too, okay?”

“Thanks, Neil,” Charlie says; his trademark smirk has returned but Neil can hear sincerity under it.

“And Charlie I’m proud of you for trying, you know that? I see you.”

Charlie just nods. He looks like he might try to say something emotional but instead, he just says. “I’ve got vodka and whiskey; you up for that?”

“Do you have exams tomorrow? My next one isn’t until Thursday.”

“Nope. Friday’s my last one,” Charlie says. “Plus I took my Econ final hammered, so I think I’d be alright a little hungover.”

Neil laughs; of course, Charlie took one of his exams drunk. “Let’s do it.”

Charlie passes Neil a bottle of vodka that’s been stashed under his bed and takes a whiskey for himself. He raises the bottle.

“To being shit at relationships.”

“To being shit at relationships,” Neil echos, and clinks their bottles together. Even though he knows this is mostly his fault, he wonders distantly if Todd and Knox are having a similar conversation right now.

They’re all just boys in love who don’t quite know how to do it right.

"You know what?" Charlie says. It's two hours later and they're too drunk for their own good. "This is all because of exams. If we weren't all so goddamn stressed, none of us would be fighting.”

His words are slightly slurred from alcohol and Neil laughs his too-loud drunk laugh.

“Exams ruin fucking everything,” Neil agrees.

Charlie looks very seriously at Neil. “Next semester we should hold a strike.”

“Charlie, I think that’s just called *a way to ensure we fail our exams* .”

“Fuck that,” Charlie says.

And maybe this is a bad idea, getting drunk, but for the first time in days, Neil feels just a bit lighter.

Neil is relieved when exams are over, but that also means Charlie is leaving to go on holiday with his parents and that Neil, at some point, needs to get his ass home for Christmas. Technically his father said he just had to be home on Christmas day, so he’s got nine days to figure out when he’s going to get there and how he’s going to handle this.

Charlie leaves on Saturday, right after exams are over.

“Hey, Charlie, call me if you need anything?”

“I’ll be fine. But same to you; especially if you go home for Christmas.”

Neil doesn’t know why Charlie thinks this could be an *if* situation, but he doesn’t say anything

“And stay in Knox and my dorm if you need to,” Charlie adds. Neil’s planning on it.

Knox leaves on Sunday and he says goodbye to Neil as well. He looks like he wants to say something about Todd before he goes, but he doesn’t.

Cameron leaves on Monday, but he comes to Knox and Charlie’s room on Sunday.

Neil has the door open but he looks up only when Cameron raps his fist on the door.

“Hey Neil, do you have a minute? I went to your room but Todd said you’re here—”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

Cameron comes to sit awkwardly in Charlie’s desk chair, and immediately starts as though he’s had this speech prepared.

“I’m sure you’re sick of everyone coming to you about this kind of thing. It’s just I’ve never known Meeks as well as you and Charlie sure as hell isn’t going to help. And you have a similar-”

Neil stops him. “Hey, Cameron, you’re going to need to give me some sort of context, I have no clue what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Oh, right. Sorry,” Cameron takes a deep breath. “How did you get comfortable with yourself even though your dad’s homophobic?”

Neil is taken aback but he tries to sound unaffected. “Oh— well. It’s still hard some days but I guess with me, I just know that this is who I am. And I can’t live any other way. I’m sorry, I don’t have a great answer; it’s just about trying to learn that what they say isn’t true and that what I am isn’t a bad thing.”

Neil doesn’t realize the truth of his words until he says them. *Loving boys is not a bad thing* .

Cameron looks slightly pained, and his eyebrows scrunch together. His fingers tap nervously in a way that reminds Neil ever so slightly of Todd. Neil knows that Cameron’s parents are extremely religious and with that, homophobic. It took a while for Cameron to come around to the fact that most of his friends were somehow queer but he was trying really hard. Neil never blamed him too much for it; parents can fuck you up big time.

It doesn’t look like Cameron’s going to say anything so Neil speaks next. “Why do you ask?”

Cameron looks intensely nervous. “I think I might be figuring out some things.”

Is Richard Cameron *coming out* ?

“Yeah?” Neil asks, raising his eyebrows and trying not to act as surprised as he is.

“It’s just that recently some of what Knox and Charlie have said about being interested in both girls and guys has really made sense to me but also what Meeks has said about asexuality has really resonated with me in the past so *I don’t know* .”

Jesus Christ, do they know *any* straight people?

A brief silence fell between Cameron and Neil.

“Well,” Neil says, “Thank you for feeling comfortable enough to come to me.”

And he means it.

“Thanks,” Cameron responds simply, giving Neil a genuine smile. He starts to get to his feet. That must be all he needed to hear.

“Wait, Cameron?”

“Yeah?”

“I know we make a lot of fun of you Cameron but I’m really glad you’re part of our friend group, you know that?”

“Thank you, Neil. That actually means a lot,” Cameron says.

“Of course,” Neil says, and then starts to go back to reading.

Cameron stops before he makes it out of the door. “Do you mind not mentioning this to anybody until I figure it out? I want to be sure.”

“Yeah, of course, Cameron.”

“Though whenever you and Todd are good, I don’t mind if you tell him. I know you guys tell each other everything.”

This makes Neil pause. “You know Todd and I are fighting?”

“Yeah, we all do; it’s pretty damn easy to tell,” Cameron says. “But I really hope you and Todd make up soon— you are both really good together.”

“Thank you, Cameron,” Neil responds, not knowing quite what to make of Cameron’s kindness.

“Have a good break Neil.”

“You too.”

The Neil Perry Support Group

December 19th, 1:47 pm

Mama Meeks

Hey Neil, you okay?

Daddy Pitts

Yeah Neil we're kind of worried

We've heard a bit about what's

been going on

Mama Meeks

Sending all our love and encouragement!

That Dipshit Nuwanda

YOU ALL ARE SO CHEESY

but seriously neil, u ok?

Neil Perry

I'm safe, I promise

just taking some time

Mama Meeks

Okay! Please keep us updated

December 20th, 5:32

Knoxious

Neil, my sister just made me watch a musical

bootleg with her and it made me think to check in

You okay?

Text us when you get a chance

December 21st, 3:42

Knoxious

Hey, Neil, hope you're alright

Daddy Pitts

Hey Neil. How are you?

December 21st, 5:27

Daddy Pitts

Remember we're here for you Neil

Mama Meeks

We're all kind of worried

Can Pitts and I come up to see you?

We're both are staying in Harvard dorms for Christmas

December 21st, 10:30

Knoxious

Neil?

Neil isn't upset at Todd anymore; that's the thing. Todd, in so many ways, is right. Neil isn't upset at any of the poets but there's a good reason Neil has been ignoring their texts and not going to make up with Todd.

Neil is upset at himself. He doesn't deserve friends like his. He's just forcing himself into isolation because he's got four days and he's lost on where to go with his dad. He can't stop thinking about how bad Todd's stutter got during their argument and about the things he said and how they made Todd look at him. Neil can't stop thinking that Todd is only a floor away and yet.

He doesn't deserve friends like this. Or a boyfriend like Todd. Neil is struggling on his own and in his mind, it's a way to pay for his crimes. For anything he's ever done wrong.

But he needs to tell his Dad off or he needs to tell Todd he loves him or he needs to text the poets back and ask *where the hell do I start picking up this mess of my making* ? He's going to fall apart if he doesn't do something soon. Neil is trapped.

This isn't what freedom looks like, Todd had said.

Neil wants to find him and ask him; *what* does *it look like, Todd?*

Chapter End Notes

i'm sorry, but cameron's always seemed like a bit of a closet case to me, so the end of this chapter happened lmao
thank you so much for reading! please remember to leave kudos and comments <3

Worthy

Chapter Summary

in which Neil makes a more important decision

Chapter Notes

hey all!
first things first: please read TW below!
i have also updated the speak low anderperry playlist! so if you want to check it out, here's that link: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/767Nw7Qt4au6ravQptUWmB?si=k7E36DsoSs6LZizgb-jVew
this chapter was an interesting one to write and i really really hope you enjoy.
once again a shoutout to the lovely @aml13! they are literally the main reason this story is coming as quickly as it is and has been really helpful; thanks to them for the inspiration and the love on my story! i couldn't do this without my beta bro.
forever writing,
auxctor

IMPORTANT NOTE:
TW// Discussion of Suicide, Blood, Allusions to Self-Harm -- In this chapter, there's going to be a pretty big discussion about Neil's suicide attempt and one flashback to when Neil was hospitalized. There are a few mentions of blood but no vivid description of Neil's suicide attempt, just conversation about Neil's depression and everyone's reaction to Neil's attempt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So much has happened in the past week, Neil is still trying to make sense of it. It keeps getting all tangled and confused and he lays in Charlie's bed, going through his current issues for the millionth time.

1. Everyone is on break. Out of all the poets, only Todd and Neil are staying at school, but Neil has to be home soon.
2. Charlie is angry with Knox because he's in love with him. Neil doesn't quite know what to think of that.
3. Knox is frustrated with Charlie. Not too terrible, but poor Knox

has no clue why Charlie's so upset with him.
4. Neil's father is angry with Neil. Quite unpleasant, but not unusual.
5. Neil is angry with his father; actually pretty unusual. Neil normally takes his anger for his father and turns it into self-hate, but something about this time is making both happen.
6. Neil is angry with himself. Pretty common, but not normally this intense. Not normally to quite this degree.
7. Todd is angry with Neil. Abnormal. And very not good.
8. Todd and Neil aren't talking. *Extremely* abnormal. And, again, very not good.

When had everything gotten so horribly fucked up?

All of this is why Neil decides to schedule another therapy appointment. Neil can't pinpoint exactly when he stopped seeing his therapist— he didn't mean to. With how busy and wild things have been, he hasn't had an appointment in nearly two months. She isn't available until after winter break, but it's all he can do at the moment, and that's enough

Neil may be mad at himself, but he needs to take care of himself; he isn't letting himself fall apart completely. Not this December.

And, as it turns out, everyone seems to be thinking the same thing.

It's early afternoon on the 22nd when there's a knock on the door of Charlie and Knox's dorm. Even with both of it's usual residents gone, Neil is still staying there.

"Todd?" Neil asks, partly hoping slightly dreading.

"Guess again!" A familiar voice says.

"Meeks?" Neil gets to his feet to let him in.

"And me!" Comes Pitts' voice.

Neil can almost hear the look Meeks is giving Pitts. "I think when I'm here, you're kind of just— implied."

"Excuse me? That's *mean* ," Pitts is saying, feigning offense, when Neil opens the door.

"Hey guys," Neil says.

Both Meeks and Pitts' smiles falter at the sight of him; Neil must look worse than he guessed. He knows he hasn't been eating as well as he's been trying to, self-care hasn't been an easy task, but he really has been trying. There's just so much to this: he's still drowning in depression, his boyfriend is upset with him, and he needs to go home to his abusive father's house. And he still hasn't slept well in a week.

It's too much.

"Hey, Neil," Meeks says, voice a bit softer than usual and Neil hates the way they're looking at him because Neil is fine. Absolutely and completely fine.

Jesus Christ , Neil thinks. *Why am I even* trying *to convince myself?*

There's no getting better if he's not honest.

"You guys can like— come in," Neil offers.

Meeks nods and he goes to take a seat on Charlie's bed and Pitts pulls Charlie's desk chair over. Neil sits on Knox's bed, across from them.

Pitts speaks first. "So, Neil— how are you?"

It's the last question Neil wants to answer. Neil almost lies but then—

He thinks about it. He hates when Todd lies that he's fine when he's not, and he knows that he should talk about it to feel better. And for the sake of his sanity.

There's no getting better if he's not honest.

"Not too good," he answers honestly.

Pitts frowns and Meeks' eyebrows worry.

"Have you been— safe, at least?" Meeks asks.

"Yeah, yeah. It's just been a lot."

Pitts nods. "We heard parts of it from Todd — we hung out with him for a bit— but we'd still like to hear you talk about it. If you want to."

And the story comes out; the entire story of what happened, from Neil's father tearing him apart these past few months to Neil and Todd's fight. Neil tells them the unabridged version to them, down to his comment about Todd's dad not caring.

“I don’t know why I was such a goddamn dick,” Neil says. “I was just tired of my dad treating me like shit, it’s all just built up— and then Todd was just acting like standing up to my Dad was so simple and I’ve just been so off recently. Christ, I don’t fucking know.”

Neil presses his hands to his face with frustration before going on.

“And then I just don’t know why Todd would think I would break up with him if my father doesn’t approve; of course my dad wouldn’t approve…”

Neil trails off.

“Christ, Neil. How do I explain this?” Meeks says.

“What?” Neil looks up at him.

Meeks seems to be deciding something, thinking it through carefully.

“Just tell him,” Pitts says to Meeks, placing an encouraging hand on Meeks’ shoulder. There’s something mourning in Meeks’ eyes that’s making Neil’s chest burn from both sadness and worry.

“Tell me what?”

Meeks looks to Pitts. “It’s— hard to talk about.”

“Yeah, I know. But he needs to hear it,” Pitts urges.

“What?” Neil asks again. For the love of God, what is he missing?

Meeks looks at Neil and then at Pitts and then back to Neil.

“Neil— what happened the last time your Dad tried to take away something you love?”

It takes a moment, but then the answer hits Neil like a freight train.“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Meeks looks like he really doesn’t want to be saying what he’s saying. “Yeah, I think— no, I *know* — Todd is afraid your Dad is going to keep making life more hellish for you, especially if you’re in a gay relationship and that it’s going to make you bad again.”

Neil’s eyebrows knit, frustrated at himself. “He thinks— he’s worried if my Dad gets worse, I’m going to try to kill myself?”

“Why else would he be this upset about the whole situation, and so insistent that you talk to your Dad? Because you’re lying to your Dad again. You know Todd, Neil, and we all know Todd isn’t going to be mad for no good reason—,” Meeks takes a deep breath. “He’s scared, Neil.”

“Oh,” Neil says again. As Charlie says, Neil is so good with feelings, he doesn’t understand why he’s been missing out on this big picture.

Maybe he just didn’t want to see it.

“But— I’m better now. I’ve been in recovery for nearly a year. I understand he’s worried but I’m really alright.” Neil doesn’t know why he’s getting defensive; he honestly doesn’t know who he’s getting defensive *at* .

Meeks sighs and looks slightly sick from the words in his throat. Pitts pats him on the shoulder again.

“Neil—” Meeks starts. “Maybe you don’t know this because none of your friends have tried to kill themselves but— just because you're better doesn’t mean we can forget. It was really hard on all of us. And that doesn’t make this your fault or anything, please hear me when I say that, but we were scared. And those first three days, because your dad was trying to keep it all shut up, we— we seriously didn’t know if you were going to be okay.”

Anger is thick in Neil’s chest; of course, his father left them to worry.

“It still hurts if I think about it too much. And Charlie— Charlie *won’t* let himself think about it. When you were in the hospital: that’s the only time I’ve seen Charlie cry, Neil.”

“He cried?” Neil asks. He’s never seen Charlie cry, and something in him softens for his best friend. He thinks back to his conversation with Charlie just a few days ago, and he wishes he could go back and hug him.

“Yeah. A lot. Cameron too. And Todd…” Meeks trails off.

Cameron cried? “And Todd?”

“Again, don’t take this the wrong way, we are so glad you called Todd or nobody would have found you in time and—” Meeks’ voice dies in his throat.

After a silence where Meeks has to catch his breath, he plows on. “But finding his best friend bleeding out on the bathroom floor really did a number on him, you know? He’d wake up with nightmares a lot while you were still in the psych ward but when any of us asked if he wanted to talk about it, he wouldn’t. We still don’t know much about what happened that night; all Todd would ever say is that there was *a lot of blood* . And at school, that first week after you attempted, Todd was a train wreck. There was this one day, it was two days after everything happened, Todd broke down in the middle of Keating’s class, got up and left and everything. We found him on the curb of the school parking lot; he was crying intensely and mid panic attack.

And we tried to figure out what exactly had him all worked up, but he couldn’t speak and when he did— Neil, you know how you called him and he didn’t pick up? Didn’t get your voicemail until about twelve minutes later?”

Neil presses his eyes closed, memory arriving like some untameable creature. “I knew he did, but I didn’t know how long it took him to get it.”

“Well, it took twelve minutes. He just told us ‘ *twelve minutes— I was twelve minutes too late and I killed him. I fucking killed him’* . You have to understand that at this point we still didn’t know if you were okay.”

“Oh.” Neil doesn’t know what to say. Of course, he knew it affected the poets, particularly Todd, but he’s spent so much time trying to forget the way that last winter buried itself in his brain, that he forgets the memory made a home in the other poets too.

“Yeah. And so this week when he was worried you were going to break up with him, it was more— he’s worried that you’re going to *have* to break up with him to let off the pressure from your Dad. He doesn’t want his heartbroken, but he’d much rather have his heartbroken than have you be suicidal again.”

Neil lets a breath go.“Fuck. I should never have called him.”

“Neil—” Meeks starts.

“No, I’m not saying I shouldn’t have called anyone,” Neil explains. “I’m just saying— I shouldn’t have called Todd or any of you all. I had just called Todd— I don’t know exactly why, everything from that night is a blur, but I guess I thought he’d understand a bit since he struggles— God, I don’t know.”

“Neil, you weren’t thinking clearly, he doesn’t blame you for calling him—none of us do. You weren’t okay and *even if* calling Todd wasn’t the best decision, you weren’t thinking rationally, and frankly, with the mental state you were in, you shouldn’t have been. It’s understandable, Neil.”

“Why did nobody tell me all this?” Neil asks. Something in him is sour and cold like guilt.

Meeks looks too nervous to answer so Pitts speaks for him. “They were worried you would blame yourself.”

“Oh, well, yeah,” Neil says. “Of course I would— this was all my fucking fault.”

“No, Neil. No. You can’t blame yourself for the things you did while you were at your worst,” Meeks says, and Neil has never seen him frustrated with Neil like this. “That was the depression, not you. We forgive you— you want to know why? Because you’re alive. Because you’ve been working your ass off to try and be better, even when you couldn’t.”

“I know, but I should have— God, I don’t know. I just didn’t mean to hurt everyone. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

“We know, Neil. And guess what? We forgive you and there’s nothing you can do about that,” Meeks says passionately and it makes Neil smile just the tiniest bit.

“I mean—” Pitts says, “I wasn’t here when this was all going down, but I can’t imagine. Meeks has talked to me about it, but I’ve never felt as welcomed to a group as I have been by you, Neil. It doesn’t seem like the world could possibly be a good place without Neil Perry.”

Neil is starting to get a bit choked up.

”And so Neil, Todd isn’t angry at you. He cares about you and he’s worried.”

“I just was— such an ass,” Neil says.

“Well, Neil— it makes sense that you were upset— your Dad’s been horrible to you these past few years. And you can apologize, Neil. Todd will understand.”

“I want to have Todd back, but I feel like I don’t deserve to be happy,” Neil says quietly.

Pitts looks at Meeks. “Are you going to punch him or should I?”

That makes both Meeks and Neil laugh

“No but seriously,” Meeks says. “You do deserve to be happy. You do and you always have and those may sound like empty words but Neil, what you do for us and who you are— God, do you deserve to be happy.”

Pitts adds on. “And you deserve someone soft Neil; someone like Todd. You don’t deserve what your father is doing to you.”

They’re all quiet for a moment before Neil speaks up.

“And what about my father? What do I do with him?”

Meeks’ answer is quiet. “What do you want to do, Neil?”

“It’s— you know— he recently said that he hopes to god I get over this “gay phase” soon; that if his son was queer,” Neil stumbles. “He’d rather not have a son at all.”

Meeks just looks at Neil and shakes his head. “This is who you are, Neil. Don’t starve yourself just because your dad tells you that you don’t deserve to eat.”

Neil looks at them, no facade for the first time in a long while. “I know what I want, but I’m too scared to do it.”

“What do you want to do?” Pitts asks. “Because we have your back.”

“You can ask us for help, Neil.”

Neil shakes his head; they say he deserves happiness, and that’s making his mind wander. “I need to make this decision about what to do with my Dad on my own.”

Meeks nods. Neil looks at them sincerely.

“But— if my dad were to cut me off or if he were to lose his shit like last year, you guys would be there for me, right?”

Pitts nods and Meeks says; “Unconditionally.”

They talk for a while longer, mostly wandering back to lighter topics like finished exams and next semester classes and New Years which they still all have high hopes of having together. They do eventually have to head back and Neil hugs both Pitts and Meeks hard and thanks them for being here.

They say it's "no big deal" but God is it a big deal to Neil. After he watches Pitts' car go off into the snow, he goes on a walk; he needs to clear his head. Neil remembers when Meeks told him to not do anything rash, and Neil is understanding.

He needs to think this through. Getting angry with Todd was something rash; talking to his father will need to be strategized if it's something he wants to do.

What Meeks said today slides into place as well, fitting like a puzzle piece in Neil's memory.

None of them saw him for the first few days in the hospital.

The next few, he didn't talk to anyone much, he spent most of his time sleeping. But, when he would fade back into consciousness, he would always find either Todd or both Charlie and Todd, asleep or reading in the uncomfortable plastic chairs.

When Neil was moved into the psych ward for the mental health patients, Charlie was the first to see him. Neil's father saw him on the second and third days. He had yelled at Neil so loudly in the room Neil was staying in that a nurse had to peek her head in and ask if everything was okay. Neil said everything was perfectly alright. Because he had to.

Meeks came on day four and Cameron on day five.

Todd came on the last night before Neil was released. Neil can remember it clearly; the nurse knocking on his wide-open door and telling him someone was here for him. His bones had frozen; his father said he wasn't coming that night but Neil still worried. When he came out, it wasn't his father.

Standing there in the middle of the large main room of the psych ward was Todd, tapping his foot anxiously against the white tile. Todd hadn't seen him yet, and seemed to be trying to prepare himself for

whatever Neil was going to look like; he was clearly trying to find a smile but failing miserably.

“Hey,” Neil said.

Todd looked over at him and this expression of pure relief flooded his features.

“Hey,” Todd responded nervously. He was wearing a button-up and dark jeans and looked more like he was going to a casual church service than just to visit his best friend in the hospital. Neil immediately felt like a mess in his t-shirt and pajama pants but that’s all any of the patients wore.

“It’s—” Todd swallowed thickly. “ *So* good to see you, Neil.”

That actually made Neil smile. “It’s so good to see you too. Want to go sit in my room?”

Todd nodded and followed after Neil.

They sat across from each other on Neil’s uncomfortable psychiatric ward bed, Neil sitting cross-legged. Todd sat with one foot tucked under himself and Todd just looked at Neil for a long time, Neil looking back at him; Neil kept seeing Todd leaning over him, talking to him, hands covered in Neil’s blood, trying to make sure he was still conscious. Neil was sure Todd kept seeing him lying bloody on the bathroom floor.

Todd was the first to break the silence. “Neil, I— I know you don’t want to talk about it but— I-I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Thank you,” Neil said quietly. “I’m sorry— I’m sorry this all happened.”

Todd just shook his head but then he looked like he might cry. “No— no. It’s okay. You look— much better. I-I was worried”

Neil’s voice was weak from shame. “I’m sorry.”

Todd shook his head again. “We don’t have to talk about it anymore. I-I just needed to tell you that.”

“Thank you, Todd.”

Neil had set down his hand on the bed between them, not thinking. Todd put his hand on top of Neil’s; Neil looked up at him and Todd

turned slightly pink, immediately starting to pull his hand away.

“Sorry— I-I— sorry,” Todd had started, but Neil had caught his hand before Todd succeeded at pulling it away completley.

“It’s okay.”

That was the first time they had ever done the hand-holding thing. All the poets had always been physical with each other, they were just that close, but Todd was new to the friend group. That was the first time Neil had felt the intention of Todd’s skin against his.

Todd had smiled ever-so-slightly. He had started to mess with the hospital bracelet on Neil’s wrist; something in present Neil catches. He forgot that was something Todd did back then, as Neil’s spent so much time trying to block that December out. Todd has done the same thing when they’re tangled together in Neil’s bed; he always screws with the worn, leather band of Neil’s watch.

Back on that day in the psych ward, they had talked about everything they could to keep avoiding the topic of what Neil had done and how Todd had found him, but it hung heavy and hungry in the space between them. It was written in the way Todd was careful when hugging Neil goodbye, trying hard to not press on any of the places that Neil had given himself a new scar or wound the past few weeks before he was admitted.

“Neil?” Todd had said into Neil’s neck. It was a few minutes past seven and Todd should have been gone before the hour began, but something about them no one wanted to disturb. When Neil thinks about it, there's always been something like that in his and Todd's relationship — whether they were friends or more— that tells anyone around them that they need to be left to this moment.

“Yeah?” Neil had asked.

Todd hugged him the littlest bit tighter but Neil could still feel the carefulness in it; normally, that would have bothered him, but he really couldn't blame Todd.

“I-I— was a little bit wrong," Todd had said.

Neil pulled away to look at him. "About what?"

"I said that I-I could take care of myself, and I was right but— I don’t want to do it alone. I-I need you to stay, okay? I need you to stay for

all of us, even if— even if it's hard to stay for yourself."

"I—" Neil started but then he stopped. Everything hurt, an ache and a knife and a weight on his chest], the pains of living were so much more than any physical pain he had ever felt. Depression was bitter like that.

But his poets needed him.

"I will. I'll stay. I promise." It wasn't a promise Neil thought he could keep but he'd made it to his poets, so then he had to.

"Okay," Todd had nodded and given him a weak smile. "I-I'm holding you to that."

"Got it," Neil had managed a weaker smile back. "Are you—"

There was a knock at Neil's open door. They both looked up, and one of the nurses was there to tell Todd that visiting hours were well past over and he really had to go now.

Watching Todd go that evening was one of the hardest things Neil has ever had to do, because he knew he was going home the next morning, back to the lion's den, and dread was even uglier on his own. He watched the heavy white doors close behind Todd and at that moment, Neil had felt completely and utterly alone.

Neil had gone back to his blank, white hospital room, and read a poetry book from the library Meeks had brought him until it was time for lights out. Once the lights were off, all Neil could see for a while were shadows and shapes from the bit of winter moonlight that came through the window. He shifted, trying to get more comfortable, but when he went to tuck an arm under his head, the plastic from his hospital band bit into his wrist. He pulled his arm out from under him with a quiet " *shit* ". It was strange how after all this, little things like that still hurt.

He brought his wrist closer so that he could see the tiny words of identification on the bracelet and read his name over and over until it no longer made sense, and *Neil Perry* was just a mess of letters and loneliness. But then he imagined Todd's fingers soft and stuttering against his wrist, thumbs messing with the bracelet. The warmth that filled his chest was unexpected and the horrible weight lightened.

Neil glanced at the chair across the room, heavy so as to be weighted to the floor, and imagined not his father sitting there on Tuesday but

Charlie sitting there on Monday, laughing at his own joke. His best friend Charlie with his confident smirk but worried eyes, still trying to make Neil laugh despite it all. And there was Meeks sitting at the end of his bed, going on and on about some study with some new antidepressant that was currently being performed in Fucking Nowhere, Texas that Neil really didn't care about but hearing Meeks care to be there was enough. Having Meeks there was plenty. And then Cameron, standing, awkwardly trying to recount every moment of Keating's lesson. Cameron never liked Keating's lectures, he wasn't one for "non-traditional teaching strategies" but he knew Neil adored Keating's class so he had tried to write down every point he knew he wouldn't remember to tell Neil. And Todd; sweet, beautiful, gentle Todd sitting across from him. Telling him about poetry and writing, talking more than Neil had seen him do before that day.

Right before Todd had left, as the nurse was ushering him out of the room, Todd turned to Neil.

"Wait, Neil—"

"What?" Neil had asked. The nurse was starting to look impatient.

"I never got to tell you— you were amazing in Midsummer."

In his squeaky hospital bed, Neil glanced at the doorway Todd had gone through, back at the hospital bracelet on his wrist, and then let his eyes fall closed for the night. He was scared, but his poets were here with him through all of it.

Hope was more places than he thought; he just had to keep looking.

And it's that thought that makes here-and-now Neil stop abruptly from where he's walking through the snow. That is what creates the thought that hits him like a lightning strike.

It's different this time.

That December, last December, was the worst time of Neil's goddamn life. And yet; he found that hope. He survived another six months with his father; he did it.

And now that he's an adult, he has a chance to try and put this all to rest. If his Dad loses his shit, Neil will survive it. He has the poets, and even though he had them last December, he now knows how deeply their friendship runs; Neil is now aware of what he means to them and vice versa. He now has a boyfriend, a boyfriend who may be insecure

but would go to the end of the earth for Neil.

But, the biggest thing Neil now knows?

He has a future.

As soon as Neil separates himself from his father, he has a future. A place where he and the poets can stay friends, a place where he can be an actor and live somewhere with flashing lights and rainbow flags and vast stages. There is a future where he can marry a man.

There would be a future where he could marry Todd if he's lucky.

And if his father freaks out; Neil has survived his father's knives of words and sour confrontations a million times, hasn't he? And, if the universe is on his side, money may be a struggle but maybe his father will be the dormant volcano Neil needs him to be to live freely.

Let his father disown him.

Neil can't get back to the dorm fast enough; the decision, the change of heart, is quick and electric. He goes up the stairs, breathing heavily, and pushes his way back into Charlie and Knox's vacant room. After a moment of digging, Neil retrieves a blank paper and a pen from his bag; his mind is running with the feeling. With this idea; this hope.

Neil sits down at Charlie's desk and tries to channel his anger and all of the things that Keating and Todd have taught him, and starts to write.

Neil is back out in the snow, pacing; he has read the little script he wrote for himself over two dozen times. He knows it forward and backward, and he looks through it once more as he types in his father's number. He can do this. He can do this.

The phone rings, and rings, and anxiety is eating Neil alive but then—

"Hello, Neil."

"Hello." Neil has everything he wants to say written and memorized, just like he told Todd to do when standing up for himself. His blood feels like ice but he's going to do this. For the poets. For Todd. For the future.

"Sir," his father corrects.

Neil takes a deep breath.“No.”

His father pauses. “I’m sorry; what did you just say?”

“Dad,” Neil brushes past it; he is not giving his father the satisfaction of Neil listening. “We need to talk.”

“Neil, you’re being very disrespectful—”

“No dad, I’m not. I need to talk to you and for once in your goddamn life you’re going to listen to me instead.”

His father is quiet, clearly shocked. *Good* , Neil thinks. Neil knows his only tools are his father’s shock and Neil’s projecting voice, but he’s going to use those for all it’s worth.

“I need to tell you that I’m not coming home for Christmas,” Neil takes a deep breath; he’s never said anything like what he’s about to say to anyone. He’s shaking from nerves.

“Neil—” his father is sharp like a blade. “We talked—”

Fear is heavy but Neil plows on. “I know— I’m not asking you, Dad. I’m telling you; I will not be coming home for Christmas.”

“Wha—”

“Or in summer. Dad, I’m not going to be home for a long time.”

His father splutters. Neil goes on.

“Because—”

Come on , Neil thinks to himself. *You thought through this; you don’t have to be scared anymore, remember? You have your poets.*

“Because,” Neil continues, “I’m sick of how you treat me. No matter what you are to me, Dad or not, respect needs to be earned. And you’ve spent almost nineteen years making me feel like absolute shit; and I’m not spending one more holiday feeling that way.”

His father says nothing, choking on his own words and disappointment for his son.

“It’s always been like this; you treating me like shit and me just taking it. And then last year, I tried to kill myself. I tried to kill myself because I was hurting. And, yeah, I may have pulled the trigger but

Dad, you cocked the gun."

Neil stops for a millisecond to breathe. He can do this. He will finish this.

"I was depressed. Desperate to not feel like I always have; to not feel suffocated anymore. I needed help, and you knew it, and I thought maybe after I survived, you would listen to how you were hurting me but you didn't. You didn't get me the help I needed because you were too damn proud and too damn scared of what people would think. Same with acting. Same with loving boys. You knew what I needed to be happy, and you knew what made me miserable, but you cared more about yourself and your own goddamn image than you ever cared about me."

"Neil!" His father starts, voice loud and toxic.

"No," Neil says firmly. "I'm not done talking."

He thinks he has a few more minutes before his bomb of a father completely goes off. The surprise weakens his father, and he's thankful.

"I'm not at Harvard; you should probably know that. I lied because I was scared of what you'd say and call me a failure but now— I don't care." Neil takes another solid, deep breath. The kind he tells Todd to take when he's anxious.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore."

It's kind of a lie, but Neil will say it and think it and recite it like a prayer until it's true.

"Dad, I'm not fucking afraid of you anymore. You can't— you can't scare me into following your plan for me; you can't pull me around against my will anymore. I'm an adult and I will spend Christmas wherever I damn well please because I'm not spending any more years or weeks or even days wanting to die because of the ways you make my life miserable; it's my life now, okay?"

He can almost hear his father's mouth hanging open. *Good* , Neil thinks. *Let him be mortified* .

"Disown me. Cut me off. Take my money. I don't care; I honestly don't want it anymore. You'll have nothing more to hold over me."

His father is clearly steaming; Neil needs to finish before his dad screams like a kettle and Neil can't get a word in anymore.

This is Neil's show now. He will no longer bend to the rules of his father's game. This is Neil choosing Todd. This is Neil choosing the poets. This is Neil choosing the future.

This is Neil choosing himself.

"Dad," Neil says. Just like he practiced. Just like he rehearsed. " I'm not coming home. I won't be coming home for a long time. And I don't want to be at an ivy league school. I'm going to be an actor, okay? And the gay thing isn't a phase; it's who I am. I'm dating a man and I'm going to marry a man, and that's how it is; the day that you're willing to accept that, call me and I'll consider coming home. But until then, leave me *the hell* alone."

Neil hangs up.

Neil collapses on the nearest bench. He presses his hands against his eyes hard enough so that soon he's seeing bursts of colors, just letting himself breathe for a moment. It's only now that he realizes it's cold as hell, and that his hands are like ice but he doesn't care.

"I just told my dad off," Neil says, quietly to himself, trying to understand what he's just done; trying to understand what it means. Then, like a tsunami, the enormity of what he just did washes over him with a skull-rattling force.

He told his dad off. Neil just picked up the phone and told his father that he was done with his bullshit, standing in the middle of the freezing courtyard.

"I just *told him off* !" Neil says, louder, even though there's no one around to hear. There's no one to congratulate him but it's okay because he needed to do this on his own and that also means there's nobody to shame him either. Everything is clearing like Neil's wiping his glasses clean, only now realizing that he hasn't been able to see properly his entire life.

I'm free now , Neil thinks.

And no matter what he told Todd, Neil realizes that is never a thought he's never truly had before. This is what being able to breathe feels like, isn't it?

Neil is exhausted and he's crying, tears cold from the weather. But he's running on adrenaline. He's high on fear and victory; he already knows this realization will hit him over and over, like a punch to the gut, but a punch that pains all his organs into working again.

The same words keep playing in his mind and he's stuck on this idea:

I'm free now.

With the enormity comes something better; he feels drunk on a freedom he wasn't aware existed. Even being away, he always felt this string tying him and his father together. How had he never realized that puppeteers never stop as long as you're something that can be controlled?

Neil's legs take him where he needs to go without thinking about it. He doesn't need to run, there's no rush, but there's something in him that has just been lit, and he needs to do this before the courage burns out. There's a prickle too, a pain of leaving his father and mother behind, but he refuses to let himself feel that yet. He just needs to enjoy the relief for a bit. Cutting ties may be a gruesome ordeal but it is also a reviving one, and Neil's pretty sure he's never been able to breathe like this before.

I'm free now.

He's still teary when he ascends the stairs, so many things on his mind, but one thing above all else. Something deeper in the *I'm free now* .

I can have what I want .

Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ. Neil's mind is racing like a car going 75 on a back road; everything he feels right now is too big. Too overwhelming. He's thankful and scared and something akin to manic on it, but he needs to do it one more time.

Ask for what he wants.

He deserves it. The poets have told him he deserves it and Neil believes them above anyone else, so he has to believe this. He *has* to.

Because Neil Perry is the kind of person who makes people he loves able to breathe. He may still not feel worthy but he needs to try and believe it because his poets love him. Because he was able to stand up for himself.

Because he’s still here, despite it all.

He finally stops in front of his destination and knocks on Todd’s dorm room door.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for reading! please remember to leave comments and kudos <3

Every Stuttered Syllable

Chapter Summary

in which Neil and Todd finally talk

Chapter Notes

hello all!
thank you so so much for all the positive feedback. it makes my feeble writer's heart so so happy.
once again, a huge thanks to the WONDERFUL and GLORIOUS @alm13 for being the best beta bro ever and texting me at all hours of the day to spitball ideas and talk about all random things, in addition to being patient with my tired ass when it takes me a while to beta their fic back. they are literally THE BEST and if you haven't please go check out their Knarlie fic 'If I Needed Someone'.
also ALSO i know i still have a few chapters to go, but I really want to write some shorter fics at some point in life? if you have any ideas, pls tell me! you can also leave requests in my asks over on tumblr (@auxctor over there as well!)
anyways, I hope you love this chapter as much as i loved writing it.
xx,
auxctor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil hears a quiet “one minute!” from inside of their dorm room and the sound of papers shuffling. The door opens.

Neil’s having dejavu; he’s remembering picking up Todd right before the semester began. Todd looks just as tired as he did that day, except for this time, it’s Neil’s fault that he looks so stressed. But Neil must look awful, too, because he can see the upset in Todd’s eyes immediately gets mixed with a sprinkle of worry.

“Hey,” Neil says.

“Hi,” Todd responds quietly. He looks like he might close the door. “What’s up?”

“I need to talk to you.”

Todd seems to hesitate before he nods, crossing his arms in this protective sort of discomfort, but stays put in the doorway. “Okay.”

So they’re doing this out here, then. Neil doesn’t mind too much, as they’re possibly the only people on this floor, but he still feels slightly exposed standing in the middle of the hall, heart on his sleeve, snare drum in his chest.

“It’s— I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry,” Neil says, words flying from his mouth before he can think through them. “I know I was an asshole, and I’m sorry. I was stressed and hurt by my Dad, but that was no excuse to treat you like shit; you were just trying to look out for me.”

Todd just looks at Neil, and Neil can’t quite read his expression. There’s a pause and Todd nods. “Thank you.”

Neil weighs the next thing he has to say in his mind, but he decides to just go for it. “I’m not going to hurt myself again, Todd. I know— you were scared for me, but— I’m not going to. I’ve got you and the poets and I’m really trying to be better.”

“I— I know you’re trying to be better.” Todd’s face softens and it seems like it was the right thing to say.

Neil lets out a breath he didn’t know he’s been holding. “And— I’ve gotten things figured out with my Dad. I’m not going home for Christmas.”

He thinks Todd is going to ask more, but Todd’s eyes just go wide with relief, and then he, to Neil’s surprise, pulls Neil into a hug.

“I’ve missed you,” Todd says into the crook of Neil’s neck. His breath is light and Neil feels something in him tremble, some soft sort of affection.

“I’ve missed you too,” Neil responds, and he feels a small smile making a home on his lips. He hugs Todd back with everything in him. “Are we good?”

Todd kisses Neil’s cheek and then smooths over the skin with his thumb sweetly. “Yes, we’re good.”

Neil starts to ask “Can I come back?” but his words aren’t quite clear because at the same time Todd asks; “Can you please stay?”

“Yes,” Neil says, nodding quickly. “Yes, of course.”

He'd give Todd the world if he asked.

Neil doesn't know why he was expecting things to be more difficult when he came back; of course, Todd forgives him. Todd is so good.

"I'm so sorry," Neil says again, but he doesn't know exactly why. He can feel emotion creeping out from it's hiding place, the energy of his confrontation fading, leaving behind nothing but tiredness and relief. And some sort of sadness Neil doesn't understand.

"It's okay," Todd says and pulls back to look at Neil. "Are you okay?"

Neil is, he really is. But the last week and the conversation with his father is hitting him, this wave of overwhelming sadness that floods his entire being. What comes out is: "I think so?"

"Neil—" Todd says, biting his lip. He's always been able to see right through Neil. "When's the last time you had a good night's sleep?"

Neil's answer is honest. "Since before we fought, I've only been able to sleep a few hours every night."

"Jesus fuck, Neil. You need to sleep, okay?" Todd says. Neil is pretty sure Todd can tell that some sort of dam has broken in Neil because his entire face is worried.

"But—" God is Neil tired. "But I need to finish talking to you. About my Dad."

"We will, okay Neil? We can talk more later but you need to sleep first."

Everything has washed over Neil so extremely at such an alarming rate. He's hit a wall, and he's easily growing delirious from tiredness and depression and thoughts of what standing up to his father truly meant. Todd takes his hand and leads him into their room, shutting the door gently.

"Todd," Neil says. "I'm sorry."

"Neil— Neil," Todd says, putting a gentle hand to the side of his face. He can clearly see that Neil feels awful, and Neil can guess it's written across his face in the bags under his eyes and chapped lips. "I know. 'S okay. But you need to sleep."

Everything that has gone down in the past twelve hours is

overwhelming.

“I’m sorry, Todd,” Neil repeats. He’s apologizing for everything: these past few weeks, these past few years, his whole life. God, he doesn’t know.

“I-I know you are. Love, I know you are.”

When Todd calls him love, Neil starts to cry. God, he’s so fucking tired.

“Hey, hey—” Todd says, and he leads Neil to his bed. He’s holding Neil’s hand in his and he only drops it while Neil is getting settled. As soon as he is, Todd lays next to him, facing him like they are too-close parentheses, and tries to wipe some of the tears away with his thumb.

“Can we sleep in your bed?” Neil doesn’t know why he asks. Maybe he just wants to be in the most Todd part of the room because he just wants to go home and Todd is the closest thing to a home he’s ever had.

“We can,” Todd says, making no indication he’s going to move. “But I-I’ve been sleeping in your bed since you left. Knox was sleeping in mine.”

He knows Neil so well. This makes Neil cry harder.

“Neil—” Todd is saying softly.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Neil says.

“I said it’s okay— what are you apologizing for?”

Neil doesn’t know but he can’t stop fucking crying. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

He buries his face into Todd’s shoulder, and he lets their legs tangle.

“Neil, it’s okay.”

But now Neil’s crying hard; he’s now crying harder than he thinks he ever has before. Harder than the night that Todd kissed his face until he had calmed, harder than he did last December when he went to Mr. Keating for advice. Harder than he did after coming out. Harder than he did the night his father yelled at him for staying out with Todd on his eighteenth birthday, the night they took the polaroids.

He's never cried quite like this.

Because he's not just crying about Todd. Not just about his Dad. What he's done has hit him once again, what cutting off his dad means, and he's crying out years and years of calculated steps and suicide notes.

"I'm not trapped. It's just— I'm not trapped anymore," he keeps saying into the shoulder of Todd's t-shirt. Todd may not know what went down and Neil can't find it in him to explain, but something tells him Todd has figured it out, or at least something akin to the truth.

"I know. I know," Todd responds, his voice a quiet, comforting affirmation.

"I'm not trapped anymore, Todd."

Neil knows it must take hours for him to breathe properly again because soon it's dark outside but the entire time, Todd right there next to him, holding him, and Neil feels like Todd may be holding him together. When Neil finally calms down, Todd finally speaks.

"Did you take your meds this morning?" Todd whispers as he leans forward, pushes hair off of Neil's forehead, and kisses the bridge of Neil's nose. "I just want to check."

"Yeah. I did; I promise."

That's the last thing Neil remembers saying before he falls asleep.

It's been too long since Neil has slept in his bed with Todd because when he wakes up, it takes a minute for him to reorient and figure out where the hell he is. But then he feels the weight next to him and relief hits him. The memory of the previous day floods in, and the pain he felt the previous night pierced him, but it has faded so that relief is easily the dominant feeling.

"M— Todd?"

"Yeah, I'm here," Todd responds quickly and Neil hears the click of his laptop closing.

When Neil opens eyes, he can feel the fact that they're a little puffy from crying but he tries to ignore it. Todd is still in bed with him but he's sitting up and has been doing some sort of writing on his

computer.

“Hey,” Neil says quietly.

Todd scoots down so that he’s laying next to Neil again and presses a quick kiss to Neil’s forehead. “Hi.”

“Good morning,” Neil smiles.

“Good morning,” Todd smiles back and Neil loves that smile so goddamn much. “Or well— I suppose afternoon.”

Neil raises his eyebrows. “Afternoon? How long did I sleep?”

“Well,” Todd says. “You fell asleep at eleven-ish yesterday and it’s just past one, so— a long time.”

“Damn,” Neil says.

Todd’s voice is a kind whisper. “You needed it.”

“Yeah, I think I did.”

Todd reaches a hand out to put his feather-soft fingers against Neil’s jaw. He uses his pointer finger to follow the line of Neil’s jaw and then trace his features in this intimate, gentle way. Neil’s eyes fall closed but after a minute, Todd pulls his hand away.

“Sorry,” he says quietly. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Oh, no. I don’t mind,” Neil whispers and opens his eyes to take Todd’s hand and kiss a few of the lines in his palm.

Todd’s voice is even quieter when he responds. “I-I’ve missed waking up next to you.”

Neil smiles against his palm. “I’ve missed it too; I’ve missed you.”

Neil watches Todd’s features soften and this little content smile touches his lips as he watches Neil kiss his knuckles and his wrist.

“Have you eaten anything?” Neil asks him.

Todd nods. “I’ve been up since sevenish.”

“You’re insane— we’re on break. Who wakes up at seven on break?”

Todd smiles and shrugs. “I don’t know, we fell asleep earlier than usual.”

“*Fucking morning people*,” Neil mumbles into Todd’s palm as sweetly as someone could say the phrase and Todd laughs. And God is Neil glad to be back.

It’s not until after they’ve gotten a late lunch and Neil has gotten ready so as to be an actual functioning human being that Todd asks.

“So— what happened with your dad?”

Neil looks up from his book. They’re sitting on the floor of the dorm, Todd leaning against the frame of Neil’s bed and Neil reading with his head in Todd’s lap.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you’re not ready,” Todd adds quickly.

Neil shakes his head and sits up. “No— no, I should explain and it’s probably good for me to— I don’t know, just get it off my chest.”

Todd turns his full body to Neil to show that he’s listening.

Neil tells him the story, starting with his decision and then tries to recount every word he hit his father with. One thing about Todd is not only is he a good listener, but he’s someone who listens to stories and has just the right reactions that make Neil feel like a much better story-teller than he probably is, but by the end of it Todd’s mouth is slightly open.

“So yeah.” There’s a bit of an emotional break in Neil’s voice. “I— I don’t know. I like— I hate him because he’s treated me like shit all these years but I already— miss him isn’t the right phrase. Just— he’s my dad, you know? And as much as I know this distance is probably best for both of us, especially me and my mental health, a part of me is sad about it? I guess— I’ve never had much of a positive father figure in him and it feels like I’m finally mourning him for the first time.”

Todd nods. “He’s your dad. Even though all he’s done is hurt you, it makes sense that you feel a little empty without him.”

Empty. Todd always knows the perfect words to describe Neil's feelings. "Yeah."

"Well—" Todd looks at Neil, eyes full of sincerity. "Standing up to your dad— that was a really hard thing. I'm so fucking proud of you."

"Thank you," Neil says.

"I-I'm serious. I'm so proud of you."

Neil leans forward and kisses him. God, has he missed kissing Todd. He's missed the way Todd's hands feel when they're holding Neil, like he's the most important thing in the history of things that can be held on to. Neil didn't realize how much he felt the absence of soft lips against his. Soon Todd pulls away and asks the next questions: Todd, forever the worrier.

"Aren't you still worried about money?" Todd asks. "And school?"

"Before I called Dad, I moved all my December allowance to a new account. Then I'll get a job once the new year starts. Meeks said if I'm in a tight spot our group is starting a "Neil Perry Support Fund" but I'm hoping to not get that desperate."

Todd grins at that. Neil does too; the poets make his heart warm.

"And with school— loans." Is Neil's simple answer.

"I'm sorry," Todd says, a slight frown on his lips.

"No, it'll be great!" Neil says confidently. "I'll just be another one of millions of Americans drowning in my student loan debt."

Todd laughs at that. A thoughtful silence passes between them.

"But are you… okay? For real?" Todd asks quietly.

There's a pause before Neil nods. "Yeah; I actually am. Really okay. I just—you're right, he's always been suffocating me; I don't want to live like that anymore."

Neil takes a deep breath before continuing. "I *can't* live like that anymore."

Todd nods; he places a hand on Neil's and Neil takes it gratefully.

"And I know I was kind of a wreck yesterday," Neil says, "But you and

I are okay, right?'

Todd nods. "Yeah— I've just been worried recently and upset over what you said about my Dad. That's why I've been so frustrated. I don't know; I just feel like I'm never going to be good enough for you and then your dad said all that shit about me and then you said…"

Todd trails off.

Neil looks at him and moves to sit just across from him so he can take both of Todd's hands in his.

"I shouldn't have said that about your dad not caring; you deserve to be cared about. You deserve to be heard and listened to, even when you can't speak from the anxiety; Todd, you should have a family that calls you fucking divine because that's what you are."

"I—thank you." Todd's eyes are so soft. "I just—Neil, you're so wonderful and I don't feel like I-I'm ever going to be worth it. It sounds stupid and juvenile, but I spend half my life laying next to you and wondering why the hell you even like me."

Neil leans forward, now so close that his knees touch Todd's, and kisses Todd's cheek.

"I like you because you're kind. I like you because you listen and you care. I like the way you write. I like how funny you are and how shy and sweet. I like you because you're beautiful. Everything about you makes me so happy; you're everything that any good person should be and in a world that has you, why would I want anyone else?"

Todd looks at a loss, so Neil looks him right in the eyes and squeezes his hands. If he's being honest, he might as well go all in.

"I'm in love with you, Todd Anderson; every damn part of you."

Neil watches Todd's eyes widen just a bit, lips parted ever-so-slightly.

Neil puts a hand on Todd's cheek. "You don't have to say it back. I just wanted to tell you that."

"Wait, wait," Todd says softly, placing his hand on Neil's wrist. "Please—say it again."

Neil smiles just a bit. "I love you."

Todd looks at him for a long moment. He's biting his lip, eyes trained

somewhere below Neil's eyes. "I love you too."

And then he kisses Neil.

Neil just freezes there for a moment before kissing Todd back. He knows Todd likes him, they're boyfriends for fuck's sake, but—

Todd loves him back.

Todd loves him back.

Todd loves Neil back.

There's something about what he and Todd have; something bigger than the gentleness. Something bigger than soft pads of fingers against arms and jaws and cheeks. Something more all-consuming to the soft "I love you's" Neil keeps whispering into Todd's lips.

With Todd, this love hurts but only in an ' *I want you more* ' way. Only in an ' *I've missed you* ' way. In an ' *I'd want you to have the world on a silver platter even if it destroyed me* ' way. Neil is realizing, these are the only kinds of pain love should really cause; growing pains. Because in this kind of hurt there is no fear of more pain; because they are so soft too and for each other. Every bit of Neil is so tender and in love with every bit of Todd, every imperfection, every stuttered syllable, every second Todd's afraid he's said the wrong thing. Because, to Neil, it's never the wrong thing. Everything, every disagreement that's come between them— like the last week— feels like a detour, a stop they have to take to get to the place where he and Todd can have the kind of relationship that is worthy of dozens and dozens of more years together. When Neil told Charlie that he'd love Todd forever, he meant it. He'll love Todd until the end of the world.

Because there's something bigger than the gentleness between them: there's an unconditionality in it all.

Neil loves Todd. And Todd loves him back. And Neil thinks it could be like this forever and God, does he hope it is.

"Can you forgive me?" Neil whispers after a while, once kisses have grown lazier and he can pull away for a moment, talking like if he speaks any louder he might break this fragile sweetness between them.

"For what?"

“For all this. For last year,” he says.

Todd gives him a small nod. “Yes— as long as you stay here with me.”

Neil will stay here forever if that’s what Todd needs. “I will. I promise.”

Neil doesn’t know when during the past few minutes they moved back to his bed, but they have. He lets his eyes fall closed as Todd outlines the planes of his face with light fingertips before Todd pulls away, looking very sincerely at Neil for a moment before placing his forehead against Neil’s neck, hugging him tightly.

“Thank you for not letting him kill you. Thank you.”

The Neil Perry Support Group

Neil Perry

Neil Perry sent a photo

:)))))

That Dipshit Nuwanda

YESSsSSSSSSssSSSS

Knoxious

HELL FUCKING YEAH

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

Wait, what?

The photo won't load.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

suck s to be you

jk jk

it's of todd and neil

Knoxious

IT'S OF NEIL AND TODD
BEING CUTE

That Dipshit Nuwanda

FINALLY the gays are bAck

Knoxious

AND THRIVING

Daddy Pitts

God bless the gays

Mama Meeks

You guys are so WHOLESOME wtf

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

Finally loaded!

You guys are cute.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

FUCK YEAH

Daddy Pitts

And there was much rejoicing throughout the land

That Dipshit Nuwanda

NEIL WHERE DID YOU GO

COME BACK 2 ME

Knoxious

Probably fucking his boyfriend tbh

Neil Perry

WHY ARE YOU GUYS
SO INTRESTED
IN TODD'S AND MY SEX LIFE

Knoxious

Because we're all sad, gay, and horny

That Dipshit Nuwada

KNox i think that;s jusst a given

Also neil that WASN'T A NO

Mama Meeks

Well not ALL OF US

Horny? I don't know her

Daddy Pitts

Wait ew Knox did you use an Oxford comma???

Knoxious

WHAT'S WRONG WITH MY OXFORD COMMA

Mama Meeks

Pitts is very anti- Oxford comma

Don't shame him Pitts that's mean

Daddy Pitts

Oxford commas just,,,

Look weird

Knoxious

Leave my oxford comma alone

I have RIGHTS

Neil puts down his phone, thinking carefully, and looks to Todd who's looking through his collection of books (which is just three precariously tall stacks on his desk), trying to find a certain copy of one.

"Can I ask you something?" Neil asks. He feels nervous, which is an unusual feeling for Neil. "I promise it's nothing bad."

Todd turns around and nods.

"I'm just going to be completely forward with you about it; is sleeping together something you want to do at some point? I just wanted to ask because we've never really talked about it and it's something I've been thinking about recently— do you want to?"

Todd looks slightly surprised but not uncomfortable, which makes something in Neil immediately calm.

Todd is blushing lightly but he sits down next to Neil and takes his hand. "Yeah, I-I would like to."

Neil notices the way his stutter slips in. "Are you sure? Because if you didn't want to—"

Todd nods enthusiastically. "No, Neil. I want to. And you'd want to?"

"Yeah. I really would," Neil says, soft thumb on Todd's cheek. "I just don't want it to be something that makes you anxious."

"No, no. I might be— a little anxious but not because I don't want to. Just because I don't want to be absolutely awful; I'd have no idea what I'm doing."

"Wait—" Is the first thought that Neil can get out. "Are you a virgin?"

"Well, yes," Todd says, slightly defensive. "I'm only nineteen. And I've only just figured out the whole queer thing— and you're not?"

"No, no, I wasn't saying it was a bad thing, I just didn't know. And, no, I'm not," Neil answers. "Junior year was an interesting time."

Todd smiles slightly and raises his eyebrows. " *An interesting time* ?"

"I haven't dated anyone too seriously before but I have gone out with

a few guys. And I met one at a party Charlie took me to." Neil says honestly.

"That's fair."

Neil can see the unanswered question. "It was just three different guys."

Todd nods, considering this. "Yeah for me— I've just never dated anyone. And with sex— I don't know. It's not like it was a conscious thing; I just never had anyone I wanted to screw around with. Plus, I-I never did too well with friends before the poets— and it's hard to have dating options when you can't talk to people for the goddamn life of you."

"Yeah?"

Todd's face is slightly red but he's smiling. "Yeah, not until I liked you was I-I like *yeah I'd definitely suck his dick* ."

Neil laughs at that. He leans forward to kiss Todd, fingers against Todd's jaw and thumb on his chin.

"Just, as I said— 'm just going to have— absolutely no clue what I'm doing," Todd mumbles.

"That's okay," Neil says softly. "I'm sure you'll be great."

Todd pulls Neil closer by the front of his sweatshirt. Neil can feel the outline of Todd's smile against his lips and he lets his hand find the small of Todd's back, feeling Todd's fingers slip the slightest bit under the hem of his sweatshirt.

"Wait—? Now?"

"We— we don't have to," Todd says shyly.

"No, no; now works." Neil's sentence comes more quickly than intended which makes both him and Todd laugh. He likes how he seems to make Todd the slightest bit bolder; it makes his chest warm in the place just right of his heart. It's a fireplace-in-December kind of warmth.

Neil moves back to lean against the foot of the bed frame and shuts his eyes for a moment when he feels Todd settle in his lap, knees on either side of his legs. He wants to remember this. There are a bit of

nerves in the back of his throat but it's not the bad kind; it's the kind of nerves that remind him this is important.

Neil opens his eyes to look up at Todd. "Hey."

"Hi," Todd responds, voice soft, "This— alright?"

Neil nods and Todd hooks his arms around Neil's neck. He moves a soft thumb across Todd's lips and lets careful fingers wander Todd's features. Neil watches as Todd's eyelids close before pulling Todd back into another kiss. He feels Todd's fingers in his hair and Jesus Christ, Todd Anderson is going to be the death of him.

Todd's breath is starting to go slightly ragged and Neil is finding his own heart is speeding up. He's doing this; he's actually going to get to sleep with Todd, and there's something that's built up from the months and months of trying not to think about this very situation (as jacking off thinking about your best friend can be pretty awkward. Especially when you share a dorm with him).

Neil reaches to undo the top button of Todd's button-down and he looks expectantly at Todd, a silent question. Todd nods hastily and Neil can see his cheeks turn slightly pink, a shade that runs down his neck like a soft watercolor.

Neil's almost done with all the buttons when Todd's fingers wander under the hem of Neil's sweatshirt again, testing, this time skating a bit farther to run over Neil's stomach. The breath catches in Neil's throat and his hands still at the buttons. He can almost feel Todd work up the courage to lean down slightly and press careful, petal kisses to the place behind Neil's jaw.

"I love you," Neil says, half breath, half honest vulnerability. He feels Todd let out a small breath as he kisses right under Neil's left ear. Everything is slow and careful and sweet, and Neil can tell that Todd is trying to revel in this all too which makes something in him light.

"Love you too." Todd's voice is slightly nervous and Neil takes one of his hands to squeeze it reassuringly. "A lot."

Neil presses a kiss to his wrist. "A lot."

When Neil pushes Todd's shirt off his shoulders he checks in again to make sure he's still alright because Todd's starting to shake slightly.

" 'M really okay," Todd confirms. Neil nods. He presses a few kisses to

the base of Todd's throat and has just gotten Todd to make a sound that Neil thinks might end Neil Perry as we know it when a phone starts to ring.

Neil's phone starts to ring.

"Jesus Christ," Neil says, following it up with a few choice swears. Todd laughs, the un-edited one that makes Neil's chest buzz, and he smiles against Todd's collarbone. There's this strange sort of knowing in Neil's chest, something that knows it can't be his father calling, which replaces regular anxiety with just a slight annoyance.

Todd leans over Neil's shoulder so he can grab his phone off the desk for Neil. "It's Charlie."

"I hate Charlie Dalton; I do. I hate him," Neil says which makes Todd laugh again. "You can just put it on silent, I'll call him back later."

"You can pick it up," Todd says, still sitting on Neil's legs and offering the phone to him.

Neil looks at him sincerely.

"I don't have to," is what Neil says but the way he says it makes it come off more like *please just put the phone back on my desk and pretend it never rang* .

"No, I would— but you know he rarely calls. Something's probably up."

Neil kisses Todd quickly before answering. Todd's right; Todd's always fucking right.

"Hey, Charlie. What's up?"

"NEIL PERRY MY FAVORITE HOMO," is Charlie's extremely loud answer.

"Jesus fucking christ," Neil says, startled. He tries to level out his breathing so it doesn't sound like he was just making out with his boyfriend and is so turned on it hurts, even though he totally was and he truly is.

"I need your help," Charlie says urgently.

"Okay. Right now?"

“Yes! It’s important.”

Neil sighs. “Okay, Todd’s here; can I put you on speaker?”

“Actually yes; Todd would be helpful,” Charlie says.

As Neil puts Charlie on speaker, Todd takes the opportunity to roll off of Neil and start to put his shirt back on, looking slightly disappointed at the fact that Charlie does indeed need to talk to them now.

Damn, Neil thinks and finds himself wondering if the fact that he actually hates Charlie at this moment makes him a poor friend.

He hears Charlie take a deep breath on the other end of the line. “It’s about Knox.”

“Of course,” Neil says as Todd asks “What about Knox?”

“Okay so— I’m going to tell him I have feelings for him. I’ve been thinking about what you said, Neil, and want him to know.”

“That’s great,” Neil says, looking over to Todd and winks. Todd blushes and Neil calls it a success.

“Well, yeah. We’ve kind of been texting and calling like nothing happened and— I want to date him. Or something like that.”

Neil grins. “You talk to him on the phone? You guys are so cute.”

“Fuck off.”

“I’m serious! When are you going to tell him?”

“I haven’t thought quite that far yet; that’s why I called. But I’m going to win his heart or so help me God.”

“I think you already have,” Todd says, softly so that only Neil can properly make it out. Neil smiles wider as Charlie asks,

“Wait wh’d you say?”

“Just— said good luck,” Todd says. He’s a terrible liar, but it doesn’t seem like Charlie notices.

“So when should I tell him?” Charlie says.

“Jesus Charlie, I don’t know,” Neil answers. He’s all for giving advice

but he doesn't know what exactly Charlie is planning on doing.

"Com'on Neil, you've wooed a boy."

" *Wooed* ?"

"Yes, you know what I mean," Charlie says hurriedly, waving off Neil's response to his use of words.

"Well— you could call him if you don't want to wait until after Christmas. Or— are you guys all still coming back for New Years?"

"New Years!" Charlie answers. "Yes, we are. You are a truly brilliant man, Neil Perry."

"I'm not sure that was exactly the work of a genius but thank you," Neil laughs.

"Anyways, what are you gays up to?" Charlie asks and Neil can hear him flopping back onto his bed at home the way he always does when having a casual conversation.

"Nothing much," Neil says; he's always been a better liar than Todd. "Just trying to decide what to do for Christmas."

Todd pulls his leg up to sit cross-legged and he takes one of Neil's hands in his.

After all, this is a decision they still need to talk about. Christmas is the day after next and they still have no plans.

"Have you guys decided on anything yet?"

"Not yet," Todd says.

Charlie doesn't even need to consider it before he has an answer. "You guys should go to Boston."

"Boston? Why Boston?"

"It's pretty close and— really nice this time of year. I went with my family a few years back."

Neil looks at Todd and raises his eyebrows. "Would you want to?"

Todd nods, a small smile on his lips. Charlie is still talking about some of the things to do in Boston:

“—you guys have got to see The Slutcracker.”

Neil pauses.“I’m sorry— the *what* ?”

“The Slutcracker,” Charlie answers like it’s a completely normal response Neil should understand.

“What the hell is that? I-I’m a bit afraid to ask.” Todd’s eyebrows are raised, slightly concerned but mostly suspicious.

“Oh well— just google it,” Charlie says.

“You’re really going to give us *no* context?”

“Nope,” Charlie responds, popping the ‘p’.

“You’re the actual worst,” Neil grins.

He can almost hear Charlie smirk. “You adore me, Perry.”

“Unfortunately.”

Charlie gasps in faux offense and Neil can almost hear him putting a dramatic hand over his heart. “You wound me.”

Neil laughs.

“Well—” Charlie says, “That’s all I needed, really.”

“Well it was good talking to you,” Neil says, smiling and missing Charlie just a bit. Todd hums his agreement, picking slightly at a thread on Neil’s comforter; he seems to be lost in a train of thought Neil isn’t a part of.

Charlie’s quiet for a long moment. When he speaks, his voice is slick with sincerity. “Thanks, guys.”

“Of course, Charlie.”

“Nuwanda, goddammit,” Charlie corrects. So he’s back on that again.

“*Nuwanda* .”

Charlie hangs up and Neil shakes his head and rolls his eyes; Christ he loves his friends. Both Neil and Todd are quiet for a minute, thinking.

“I’m so glad he’s going to just be honest with Knox,” Neil says

honestly.

Todd nods. “Yeah—Knox is so in love with him. It’s really sweet.”

“Really? I know Knox likes him but, that’s literally all I know.”

“Oh yeah,” Todd says. “For like two months now, he’s been crazy about Charlie.”

Neil nods; God he hopes Charlie goes for it.

“So… Boston?” Neil asks.

“So Boston,” Todd responds.

“Would you want to? It could be fun.”

“Yeah,” Todd nods and squeezes Neil’s hand. The places where Todd’s palm touches Neil feels slightly electric and there’s something wondrous about still getting chills from stupid things like holding Todd’s hand after over a year of knowing him.

“Just— one problem. Money. We’re going to need a place to stay and —“

“I-I can get it.”

“No. No.” Neil shakes his head.

“Consider it your Christmas present,” Todd says softly.

Neil has never liked Christmas; he doesn’t mean to be sour about it, and when the poets have tried to involve him in Secret Santa over the years he’s participated enthusiastically, but when it comes down to it Neil isn’t a fan of Christmas. Over the years, the holidays have become something worth dreading, as this time of the year he and his dad have always had it out. Every fucking year. And last year, as Neil had gotten out of the hospital only a few days before Christmas it had been even worse.

Even now that his father is cut off, the trauma from the past years grabs him by the wrist and presses its nails in. Not to mention, this year he’s missing his mother. His mom, while never perfect, was never bad quite like his father. If he’s really honest, he does miss his father a little too; it makes him feel sick but that’s the truth.

Luckily for Neil, the only other person he knows who dislikes

Christmas is the person he's spending this one with.

Todd, as far as Neil knows, doesn't care for Christmas the same reason Neil does; it makes him think of his parents; especially this Christmas with his family vacationing without him. It's the same reason Todd hates his birthday.

The holidays always make a family rear it's ugliest heads.

Which is why the two of them have decided to not celebrate Christmas. This was something they'd figured out a while back before they had their falling out.

"It's a big present—" Neil responds. "Plus I thought we weren't celebrating Christmas."

Todd kisses his forehead and squeezes both his hands. "Just— let me do something for you for once. You're always doing things for me. Please."

"Okay," Neil says, still hesitant; but then Todd kisses him and he completely forgets why he was trying to argue in the first place. He's going to be spending Christmas with his boyfriend in Boston.

It's Christmas Eve and Neil and Todd are packing things up for their impromptu trip; they're planning to spend one night in Boston and stay with Pitts and Meeks the next night before heading back home. They've also officially denounced Christmas as a holiday.

"I love how we've turned 'let's not celebrate Christmas' into 'create our own holiday,'" Todd's saying as he folds the same t-shirt for the third time because it won't line up correctly.

"Independence day will be a great holiday."

"Neil, we can't call it independence day. That gets people confused."

"But, July 4th is a stupid holiday and so this is *The* Independence Day."

Todd laughs. They've decided to celebrate Neil's recent freedom in place of Christmas.

"But it's your independence day too," Neil says, elbowing Todd softly.

“From what?”

Neil kisses his forehead. “Independence from your parents too.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Todd says, but Neil can see the slight furrow of his brow and the way the corner of his mouth twitches down ever-so-slightly. Neil finds himself frowning too.

“Todd— sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Todd says, quickly, like that answer is merely instinct at this point.

Neil raises his eyebrows.

“It’s stupid. Just— the holidays make me sad, that’s all. And I’m trying to not think about it because you and I are going to have a good time. We are. But— I don’t know.”

Neil knows what he means and he nods slightly; the holidays always leave that slight mark where a loving family should be. “Yeah.”

“Sorry. I-I’m making this whole thing all sad now.”

“No, no,” Neil says, pulling Todd into a hug. They stand there for a long time, Todd’s head on Neil’s shoulder, Neil whispering soft words. “Don’t be sorry. I know this all sucks, but we’re going to have a good holiday.”

Todd nods, “I-I know we are.”

There’s another one of their not-bitter silences, and Neil breaks it by kissing the top of his head. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Todd offers a smile back, before turning back to packing. Neil can almost see him flip through the different topics in his mind to find a new one to talk about, like flipping through records or pages of a book. “Are hotels even going to have spots open on Christmas?”

“At least one should?” Neil says, considering. “Worst comes to worst, nowhere is open and we sleep in my car.”

“Romantic.”

Neil loves when Todd is sarcastic; he doesn’t see Todd like that as often as he wishes. He smiles over at Todd. “Or we could Mary and

Joseph it and go sleep in a barn."

This makes Todd laugh. "Sometimes I-I forget you were raised Christian."

"Well, my dad isn't a flaming homophobe just for shits and giggles," Neil says, feigning seriousness.

"Or—" Todd says. "We could be normal people and call ahead so we *don't* have to sleep in your car."

"Yeah, probably should."

"By that," Todd says quickly. "By that I mean *you* should be a normal person and call."

Neil grins at this and leans over to kiss him. "Of course. I'm not making you call anyone; I know how much you hate doing that."

"I love you," Todd smiles and he kisses Neil before Neil gets a chance to.

Neil only has to call three to find one with an open room, and he tells Todd after he's made the reservation. Todd kisses him on the cheek before they go back to packing. All sadness of the holidays seems to have gone temporarily dormant in Todd's mind and that makes breathing easier for Neil.

There's a comfortable silence between them before Todd says, casually:

"I'm glad there's a hotel open though; I really didn't want to lose my virginity in your car."

Neil chokes on nothing which makes Todd, who has already gone bright red at the realization of what just left his mouth, laugh.

That night, after they're done getting things ready so that they can leave at some god-awful Todd-worthy hour in the morning, they curl up in Neil's bed to watch *The Shining* on Todd's laptop. (They both figure it's one of the least Christmas-y movies they can think of but hey, at least there's some snow, so nobody can tell them they didn't at least try for a little holiday spirit). When Todd tangles into him, Neil

notices that the sweatshirt Todd is wearing is one of his, and Neil's pretty sure he has a small aneurysm.

God, he's such an in-love idiot. But it's okay. It's okay that he's so in love with a boy who's curled up next to him in his bed; Neil moves closer to Todd, wrapping himself better around him, and kisses his cheek. Todd makes this sweet, appreciative noise in the back of his throat, and Neil loves him. And no one can stop him.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for reading! please remember to leave kudos and remember comments are always appreciated <3
(also this chapter was brought to you by the author researching "things to do in Boston" and discovering The Slutcracker)

Independence Day

Chapter Summary

in which the author takes the opportunity to write 6k words of soft and slightly saucy anderperry

Chapter Notes

hello all!
first things first, SMALL WARNING: this chapter is just a lil smutty so please mentally prepare yourself for that.
of course, shout out to my wonderful friend and beta @aml13 ! they are the best and two of us MAY OR MAY NOT have a cool fic planned (and working on that fic may be why it took me a hot minute to finish this chapter)
this chapter is mostly fluff and smut, but with the stress of the world right now, i think some chill anderperry is what we all need! i hope you enjoy <3
yours,
auxctor

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil kind of loves when Todd drives. Since Todd doesn't have his own car, Neil has only seen him drive a handful of times, and if Neil's honest, Todd used to be a truly terrible driver. He never made fun of Todd for it— at least not like they all made fun of Cameron who can't make left-hand turns for the life of him or like they all attempted to make fun of Charlie for failing his drivers test multiple times— because Neil knew the main reason Todd was such a god-awful driver was due to the way his anxiety always got the best of him. Todd would completely lose all calm when he tried to drive. But Todd must have driven with Jeffery this past summer or something because when Todd asks to do half the drive to Boston and Neil very hesitantly gives him the keys to his car, Neil is pleasantly surprised. Todd has this cute concentrated look on his face when he drives and it gives Neil an excuse to put a comforting hand on his leg, so it's really a win-win situation. There's very little anxiety in his features, even with the roads being a bit slippery.

It's in the car that the idea comes to Neil; he only does it because he knows that Charlie, in the long run, won't mind.

***Neil Perry** has added **That Dipshit Nuwanda , CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy , Mama Meeks , Toddy Boy,** and **Daddy Pitts** to a group chat.*

Mama Meeks

???

Neil Perry** has named the group chat **The Charlie Dalton Support Group

That Dipshit Nuwanda

nEIL whAT tHE FUCK

i hate you

i hate you

Neil Perry

;)))))))

That Dipshit Nuwanda

i hate you sO MUCH

i hate u and everything u stand for

Neil Perry

EVERYONE TELL NUWANDA

HE'S BEING A DUMBASS

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

You’re being a dumbass.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

HE HASN’T EVEN TOLD YOU

WHY IM A DUMBASS

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

I’m making the safe assumption that you’re

being a dumbass like usual.

And that Neil is correct.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

DICK I FUCKIN

HOPE TO GOD UR COMING FOR NEW YEARS
BECAUSE I AM THROWING HANDS

Neil Perry

Sskskkskskskskskk

Mama Meeks

NO THROWING HANDS

Neil Perry

challenge him to a duel

That Dipshit Nuwanda

BITCH I AM GOING TO DUEL YOU TO DEATH

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

There should be a “the” before the word “death”, Charlie.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

N

U

W

A

N

D

A

Neil Perry

Okay OKAY enough

I haven’t even GOTTEN TO

THE FUCKIN POINT YET

Mama Meeks

What’s the point?

Neil Perry

NUWANDA’S

IN LOVE WITH KNOX

That Dipshit Nuwanda

NEIL

I HATE YOU

love is a strongggggg word

Neil Perry

Fine

NUWANDA

”HAS FEELINGS”

FOR KNOX

Mama Meeks

Wait, really????

Daddy Pitts

HOLY SHIT

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

Yeah, they’re like really fucking obvious.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

i will DUEL

Daddy Pitts

ASK HIM OUT
FALL IN LOVE
HAVE 16 CHILDREN
AND NAME THEM ALL AFTER ME

Mama Meeks

Pitts what

Neil Perry

COME ON GUYS
BULLY NUWANDA INTO WINNING

KNOX's heartttttt

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Neil i hate youu

I'M GONNA DUEL YOU TOO

Neil Perry

COME AT ME I DARE YOU

Mama Meeks

Everyone needs to CHILL OUT

Nobody is dueling anybody

Neil Perry

Hey at least i know how to FIGHT

Toddy Boy

i hate to break this to you neil but

stage fighting really doesn't count

Daddy Pitts

ajjkedjahlajhdefqg

Neil Perry

Todd :(((

i see you on your phone out there

Pls finish putting gas in the car

and stop making fun of me

:(((((((((

Toddy Boy

i'm waiting for the tank to finish filling up

and sorry i wasn't trying to make fun of you <3

Neil Perry

okayyyy <3

Daddy Pitts

YOU TWO ARE SO CUTE WTF

That Dipshit Nuwanda

You guys are so cute and in love,,,

retching noises

Neil Perry

Let me be in love with my bf :(

also bitch

you're so in love with knox so stfu

That Dipshit Nuwanda

NEIL

When they get to Boston, it’s almost eleven. About halfway through the drive it started snowing and so Todd let Neil drive the rest of the way

They've planned to spend most of Independence Day (formally known as Christmas day) wandering Boston, planning to actually do things the day after before going to see Meeks and Pitts, in addition to making something nice for Independence Day lunch since they knew none of the local restaurants would be open.

As it has turned out, neither of them know how to cook for shit, so what was originally supposed to be a nice lunch consists of ramen and chips, because Neil and Todd are just that classy.

There's a little stovetop in their somewhat shitty hotel room, and Todd sits on the small space on the counter while Neil stirs the ramen. Todd is watching him with a slightly, unintentionally judge-y expression.

“I won’t ruin ramen! How can someone ruin ramen?” Neil says, looking down at the pot of noodles in front of him.

Todd smiles at Neil when he defends himself softly. "I didn’t say anything."

“You look like you’re judging me,” Neil says, giving Todd a small pout.

“It’s just been boiling for a *long* time.”

"It's been boiling the perfect amount of time," Neil says surely. Todd slides off the counter to kiss the place below Neil's ear which causes Neil to take in a sharp breath. He feels Todd smile gently against the side of his neck as he presses a few more kisses there and Neil turns to kiss him properly.

They have lunch sitting across from each other on the hotel bed and at one point Neil makes Todd laugh so hard he chokes on his food and Neil's entire being is drunk on love, for Todd and for the person Neil is around Todd.

(If Neil’s honest, the consistency of the ramen does seem a bit off, like he boiled it too long or something, but that is a fact Todd does *no* t need to know.)

In the afternoon they wander the city a bit in the light snow. Everything is closed but there are still lights from apartments and the

city is all decked out in lights and decorations. Even if they aren't celebrating, it's still beautiful and Neil walks through the city with Todd's gloved hand in his. While they're in the city they walk in comfortable silence, only speaking to point out especially stunning lighting displays or businesses that have pride flags in their windows. Eventually, they wander to The Commons, a huge park area; it starts to snow a bit harder when they do. Everything is covered in a sparkling layer of soft snow, but it's the kind that isn't too deep so it's much more beautiful than bothersome. They wander around without a particular destination; Neil finds that if he walks just a bit slower than Todd, Todd subconsciously leads. There's something nice about it, as Neil well knows if he asked Todd exactly where he wants to go, he'd tell Neil that he has no clue and have Neil decide where they go.

Todd knows what he wants; he always has. He just doesn't always *know* that he knows what he wants.

They fall into the easy conversation the two of them always do. They talk about exams and all the things they missed while they weren't talking.

"Two new poems? Can I read both?"

"Maybe," Todd is saying, a small smile on his lips but slight insecurity in his features.

"They're brilliant."

"You haven't even read them yet."

"Well, I know they will be," Neil says and Todd blushes but none of it is flattery; it's all the truth in Neil's bones. It's his honest opinion of Todd's writing and how it burns and builds beautiful cities in the brain of whoever reads.

The conversation wanders, just like them; Neil doesn't know when Cameron comes up, but he does. Todd is saying something about a study session he, Cameron, and Knox had when Neil is reminded of his and Cameron's conversation a few days ago.

"Did you know Cameron's questioning his sexuality?" Neil asks once Todd has finished his story.

Todd looks up abruptly from where he was watching the vastness of the snow. He's got snow sprinkling his cheeks and Neil can't stop thinking about how he's the most beautiful person he's ever fucking

seen. “No— no, should I of?”

“No, no. He just came to talk to me earlier this break and he said I could tell you about it— and I don’t know, I've just been feeling kind of guilty about it."

Todd's eyebrows crush together slightly. "Why's that?"

"For all the 'token straight' jokes Charlie and I have made over the years; that had to make this all more confusing."

Todd considers this for a moment. "That's always been more Charlie than you but— you can always talk to Cameron about it. Apologize, you know?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's true. I don't know. I guess I just feel shitty over it."

Todd smiles this soft, comforting smile at him. "Just talk to him— I-I'm sure he isn't taking it half as hard as you are taking it out on yourself."

Neil nods.

"And maybe—“ Todd starts, "I could try talking to him— just about his sexuality. Since it's been a time for me."

Neil grins at him widely, at Todd and at how much he cares. They've gone off the paths and are now wandering through the snow-covered grassy area. They are quiet, just smiling softly, just appreciating each other's very existence, then Neil turns back to start leading Todd to find a place to sit for a while. Todd breaks the silence first.

“I also forgot to tell you something."

Neil looks over at him. “What’s up?”

Todd pauses for a moment.

“I made an appointment with a psychiatrist.”

Neil is taken aback. “Really?”

“Yeah, I’m going to *try* it,” Todd emphasizes the word try and Neil nods. He doesn't know what he was expecting Todd to tell him, but he feels a full warmth in him, a proud and loving feeling.

“Wow— I’m proud of you. What made you reconsider?”

“Truthfully? I’m so fucking sick of feeling anxious. I wasn’t able to get an appointment until the tenth but— I’m trying it.”

Neil doesn’t know what to say. He just presses a quick kiss to Todd’s cheek before drifting off into thought for a moment.

“If you don’t mind my asking— why does the idea of taking medication bother you so much?”

Todd looks away. “I-it’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not.” Neil squeezes his hand.

Todd pauses to gather his thoughts.

“So it's like— the anxiety sucks. The anxiety makes me fucking— fucking miserable but I just—” Todd loses his words and looks over at Neil. Todd always gets this look in his eyes when he gets frozen and can’t find the language, this slight panic, and Neil immediately pulls him into a quick hug, kissing the top of his head as he does. He doesn’t care that they’re in the middle of the icy path or that there’s snow in Todd’s hair.

“Hey, hey. Deep breath.”

Neil feels Todd let out a warm breath against his neck.

“Neil— what if I can’t write anymore?”

Neil's eyebrows furrow, slightly confused. “What do you mean?”

“ ‘S— I don’t know. Just— I’m worried medication is going to be different. Make me different.”

“Todd, it won’t. You’ll still be you, just hopefully less anxious.”

“This is going to sound ridiculous but— I don’t know what I’m going to be if the anxiety goes away. And I-I know there’s more to me but— I’ve never been without it. I don’t know what I’m going to be like; I’ve been anxious since I was a kid, as long as I can remember. I don’t know— it’s weird. It’s just— weird.”

Todd lets go of Neil’s hand to sweep some snow off the bench they've now arrived at and sits down. Neil sits down next to him. Neil doesn’t know if Todd takes his hand first or if he takes Todd’s, but they’re holding hands again, Todd looking a little distant, thinking. Soft silences and intertwined fingers are becoming second nature to them

and Neil revels in every moment of it.

Todd sighs. “Or— if the medication *doesn’t* work, that means I’m never going to be free of the anxiety. And that’s its own kind of terrifying.”

“Well there’s a lot of different medications,” Neil says.

“I know— that’s just what my brain’s thinking, I didn’t say it was rational. It’s just a lot of unknown and— I hate unknowns. You know how much I hate unknowns."

Neil nods. “Well, I’m going to be here with you through it all, okay? It’s not going to change who you are Todd, and I’m going to be here with you the entire time.”

“Thank you.” Todd’s small grin is like a candle in an otherwise dark room. From the ways Todd's shoulders straighten from a bit more confidence, Neil knows the words helped and that makes something in him buzz.

“And if it screws you up or you don’t like it— you can always come right back off,” Neil says.

Todd nods. “Exactly.”

“I’m proud of you,” Neil repeats. He leans over to kiss Todd’s jaw.

“You said that earlier.” His breath catches as Neil kisses down to his neck. Neil leaves a quick mark that makes Todd gasp slightly, relaxing at the touch, but Neil moves up to kiss Todd’s cheek instead of continuing, not wanting to get carried away while they’re still out.

“Yes, but it’s true,” Neil says. “And I’m going to keep saying it until you hear me properly; I know how much you hate doing that.”

“Doing what? Making phone calls or trying new things?”

“Both," Neil says and Todd leans over to kiss his cheek. Todd's lips are cold but Neil loves it nonetheless; any contact from Todd is its own kind of blessing.

They talk for a bit longer before starting back. At some point, Neil starts teasing Todd for something or other and Todd puts snow in Neil’s hood, laughing.

“I hate you,” Neil says, trying to shake out his hood without taking his coat off because it’s cold as fuck but failing terribly.

Todd smiles at him and says with this slight confidence Neil rarely sees in him.“No— you don’t”

“No, I don’t.” Neil grins and pulls Todd into a proper kiss. He feels Todd relax and it makes something in Neil buzz with the sudden emotion of awe; Todd Anderson loves him. Todd fucking Anderson loves him.

Neil pulls away briefly to make sure that anyone anywhere near them is paying the two boys kissing in the snow, no attention as that’s something that always makes Neil nervous about showing Todd affection in public.

Todd seems to notice what Neil’s doing and he pulls Neil back into a kiss. “I-It’s Boston— people tend to not mind this kind of thing here.”

“I know,” Neil says softly against his lips. “Just wanted to make sure.”

“Thank you.”

This , Neil thinks, *is one of the shittiest parts of being gay*. The slight fear that follows him, even in the most progressive of cities, even in the 21st century. But he tries to ignore it and focus on the gentleness of Todd’s lips on his and the feeling of Todd’s left hand warm in his right. It’s the kind of kiss that makes it feel like nothing else matters.

Which is how he manages to catch Todd completely off guard when he retaliates for Todd putting snow in his hood earlier and drops a small handful of snow down the back of his shirt. Todd lets out this loud squeak that Neil’s never heard him make before and Neil erupts into laughter.

“That’s cold as— fucking— christ!”

This makes Neil laugh harder. Once Todd stops swearing (a number of swears Neil has never heard from him before), he throws a betrayed look in Neil’s direction.

“I’m withholding kisses.”

“Aw, come on,” Neil grins at him. “Besides, you started it.”

“I didn’t put it *down your shirt,”* Todd says. He’s pretending to be mad but failing miserably.

“ *Come onnn.”*

Todd leans over and, a bit begrudgingly in a way that Neil knows is just for show, kisses Neil. This makes Neil break into a wide grin and kiss Todd hard, not caring who sees and who knows that Todd is his boyfriend. And despite everything that has happened, he knows he and Todd are going to be okay for a long time.

As soon as the hotel room door closes behind them, Neil pulls Todd into a kiss, and he can taste intention on Todd's bottom lip when he kisses back.

He presses Todd against the back of the hotel room door, and this kiss is so different than any they've had before; this one has a different sort of intensity. Something flutters in Neil's chest. He feels Todd's fingers try to find their way under his T-shirt and he has a sudden, desperate need to feel Todd shiver and move under his touch.

Neil really fucking wants to have sex with Todd.

"Hey, do you want to—" Neil starts.

He doesn't even have to finish before Todd pulls away and nods at him. "Yes. Yes, if you do."

Neil smiles at him then leans forward to kiss him again. "Of course I do."

Todd pushes Neil's jacket off his shoulders, and Neil helps Todd out of his and Jesus fuck, this is really happening, isn't it?

"Wait, one second," Neil says, pulling away.

"Are you okay?" Todd says, concern in his soft features, eyebrows lowered slightly.

"Yeah, yeah, I just—" Neil feels around his pockets and finally finds his phone. He pulls it out, turns it off, and then chucks it somewhere in the general direction of the bedside table. Distantly, he hears it tumble across the carpet. Todd laughs as he turns off his own phone and follows suit. Neil grins at him and Todd smiles back; Neil can feel his heart speeding up. There's this beautiful boy in front of him that he loves and he's allowed to touch him; Neil is allowed to have the things he wants and Todd wants him right back.

Neil properly takes his coat the rest of the way off and drapes it over the back of the chair where Todd's already is. Then he's got one hand at Todd's jaw and the other in his belt loop, and it's only then that he realizes Todd is shaking.

"Hey," Neil says. "Todd, sweetheart, are you okay?"

Todd nods.

"It's not you— I just do that sometimes. Side effect of the constant anxiety," he says, and although he's shy, still pressed against the hotel room door, he smiles.

"Okay."

Todd shakes his head, understanding. "I promise Neil, I'll tell you if I-I need to stop but I want to."

"I know you will. I just want to make sure."

"I trust you," Todd says, voice quiet and fragile, before putting a hand on the back of Neil's neck and pulling him back into a kiss.

Those words, the *I trust you* from Todd, is probably the best thing Todd could have said. It's one thing to love someone. It's a whole other to trust them.

They stumble around a bit, blindly trying to make their way back to the hotel room bed, not wanting to break apart to take the time to locate where the hell any of the furniture is. They bump into the dresser and step on each other's toes a bit, but it just makes Todd laugh lightly which causes the smile on Neil's face to grow. Eventually, Neil feels the back of his knees hit the bed, and they both fall onto the mattress with next to no grace. Todd's laughing, but he also sounds a little enchanted by the mere chaos that is Neil Perry.

Neil is laughing too. This is what sex with your best friend should be like.

He will say it over and over again but; he is so in love with Todd Anderson.

Neil lands on his side and their limbs tangle, every point of their beings lined up, knees to knees, wrists to wrists, hips to hips, hearts to chests. That is until Todd wraps one leg around Neil's hip and Neil's heart is a frantic, wanting thing while simultaneously, Todd's lips are

calming.

For a while, that's all they are, just deep kisses and heavy breaths. Neil feels safe; he feels safe in this bed with Todd and the sound of the air heater. There's comfort in the gentle fingers against his skin; Neil, his entire life, has never felt safe; back when he lived at his father's house, even though the only physical his father ever got with him was angry fingers tight around Neil's wrist, he always felt unsafe. He always felt scared.

But everything with Todd is coming home to a house that looks nothing like the one Neil grew up in. This is a house that brings comfort and has warm kitchens and sweet music.

At some point, they shift, and then Todd is in Neil's lap, knees on either side of Neil's legs, similar to the way he was when they'd been interrupted two days ago. Neil can hear how heavy Todd's breath is, but it's not the anxiety type of breathless, it's the kind of breathless Neil is feeling too because Todd has always been and always will be the soft to Neil's storm, the relief to this heart that feels everything so deeply.

"Hey," Todd says softly, arms around Neil's neck, looking right at him with those blue eyes that Neil couldn't stop loving if he tried. But he'll never try.

"Hey," Neil says back, hands on Todd's sides.

"I love you," Todd says and Neil doesn't hold back when he kisses him.

He drifts down to kiss Todd's neck, and Todd immediately gasps, fingers sliding into Neil's hair.

"God— fucking Christ," are Todd's ever-so-eloquent words of approval, and Neil smiles against his skin. Neil's fingers wander under the hem of Todd's t-shirt and Todd takes another sharp breath.

"Doing alright?" Neil asks as he takes an experimental nip at the side of Todd's neck and Todd actually, properly moans at that.

"That. Do that again," Todd says quietly, and Neil likes Todd during sex; he seems so surprisingly relaxed. He's not afraid to ask; he doesn't stew in decisions until his anxiety boils. With Neil, he's open. "And yes I-I'm doing— *just splendid* ."

Neil can't help but laugh lightly at Todd's phrasing; only Todd could say something like that.

"Shut up, I'm not thinking straight," Todd says smiling, eyes still pressed closed.

"No, I know," Neil says. "Just only your default response would be *just splendid."*

"Stop bullying me," Todd tries to sound offended but he's laughing slightly. "Do you *really* want to make fun of me right before you're about to get laid?"

"Good point," Neil says, going back to kissing and nipping at Todd's neck. Todd looks like he was about to have some response to "good point" but he loses his words; he tugs slightly at the back of Neil's hair in a way that makes Neil let out a sharp breath in response to Todd's.

Neil's still slightly stunned that this is a thing that's actually happening; something that he's wanted for over a year with Todd. So many months have led him here, but every moment is worth it; he's allowed to love Todd now. He is free to love and be loved and Christ is he in love.

Neil takes Todd's shirt off first; the back of Todd's shirt is still a little wet from snow which makes him laugh a little, but he shuts up to kiss every space of Todd's skin that he can. Down his sternum and along his collar bones and on his shoulders; he loves the soft little sounds Todd makes and he loves that Todd doesn't seem to hold back.

Todd's fingers are fumbling with the hem of Neil's sweater when Neil stops him, placing a careful palm on Todd's wrist.

"Wait—"

Todd immediately stops and pulls away to look at Neil, a worried frown on his lips, eyes a bit wider. "What's wrong?"

"Sorry, nothing's wrong," Neil says. He's not used to not being able to find his words. That's Todd's thing. "I just wanted to tell you that… I have some scars. From last year. They aren't bad, they just never completely faded; I just wanted to warn you."

"That— that doesn't bother me, Neil," Todd says softly.

"Okay. I just wanted to make sure."

Todd just nods, understanding, and kisses Neil's forehead before helping him out of his sweater and unbuttoning Neil's button-down underneath.

Once Neil shrugs the button up off, Todd runs soft fingers over the scars on Neil's upper arms and shoulder and his hips and anywhere else that Neil had managed to fuck up back when he was sick. Neil's sure Todd has seen glimpses of these damaged bits of skin a dozen times since they live together, but it's something Neil has always subconsciously tried to keep out of sight since he got out of the hospital.

Todd doesn't say anything. He just gives a shake of his head, looking at the places that Neil's hurt himself; Neil understands the gesture. It's not a judging one. Todd is just wishing that Neil had never hurt badly enough that he needed to take it out on himself.

"You're okay now," Todd says to Neil, but Neil's not sure if it's really a confirmation for his ears. Todd gives Neil a small kiss on the lips then just looks for a while; not at the scars. Just at Neil. He traces shapes on Neil's chest and does the thing he's gotten in a habit of doing where he just softly touches Neil's face; he looks like he's trying to memorize Neil, which makes Neil's chest grow electric. He just watches Todd back, arms behind him to keep himself propped up, head tilted ever-so-slightly as he tries to memorize Todd too.

"I love you," Neil says.

"I love *you*."

Neil pulls Todd back into a kiss. They're like that for a while, all soft kisses, but then Todd's fingers start experimentally slipping ever-so-slightly underneath the waistband of Neil's jeans and Neil can feel himself slowly losing all of the calm composition he has because he just wants Todd.

And then they've turned over and Todd is on his back and Neil is hovering above him, knee between Todd's legs.

"Oh *fuck*," Todd breathes, and Neil leans down to kiss him, smiling. When Neil moves his knee slightly, Todd lets out a shameless noise that makes Neil shiver; he likes the sounds Todd makes and the way he moves when Neil touches soft fingers against bare skin.

At some point, Todd looks up at Neil, pupils wide and breath heavy, and starts to undo Neil's belt. Neil feels his breath catch.

It all gets pretty hazy from there. For Neil, sleeping with Todd is so surreal from months of wanting and wishing to be able to feel Todd's touch against his skin; the next thing he knows, he's in between Todd's legs, and Todd is completely undone. Neil thinks he might lose his mind. The preparation takes a while since Todd has never done this before, but Neil doesn't mind. It may not be the most comfortable angle for Neil's wrist but he likes getting to watch Todd's face and finding which way he should crook his fingers to get Todd to let out these sweet noises and that's about the best thing Neil can imagine doing right now.

Neil's trying to be careful, wanting to make sure Todd's anxiety is quiet. "Just tell me if you need me to stop or something."

"*Please* don't stop," Todd says in a voice that makes Neil thank God that he's kneeling because it would make him weak in the knees if he were standing.

When Neil gets the hang of it, he watches Todd's eyes roll back and Jesus Christ, Neil is going to fucking die. He can't handle the way Todd looks; how beautiful he is.

"Okay, okay," Todd breathes out quickly after a while, putting a hand on Neil's arm to slow his movements. "Can you please—just— fuck me? 'M going to lose it if you don't."

Neil smiles, trying not to look too proud of himself; he loves that he has the ability to take Todd apart like this.

"Of course," Neil responds, kissing Todd softly.

"Stop looking so smug," Todd laughs, breathless.

Neil smiles innocently, playing dumb. "Oh, whatever do you mean?"

Todd just rolls his eyes before pulling him down into a kiss, still a bit out of breath. "You— have no idea— what you do to me."

Neil thinks he might; he's guessing something similar to what Todd does to him, he's both so turned on and both so in love that it physically hurts. Todd makes another indelicate noise when Neil nips at his neck a few times before pulling away and slipping off the bed to get a condom out of his bag. He feels Todd watching him, and when Neil looks over he is, smiling.

"What?" Neil asks.

Todd smiles wider. "Nothing."

"What?"

A soft silence passes.

“You’re beautiful,” Todd says quietly.

Neil is so damn in love with him, it’s honestly insane. His love for Todd is so deep, it slips down in canyons and runs through him like the blood in his veins. Neil doesn’t know what exactly to say to that, so he just stands there for a moment, completely vulnerable, and just looks at Todd. There are no words to put to the feelings he’s having at this moment, so he doesn’t try, and Todd seems to get it.

When he does move back to the bed, his heart is beating quickly and loudly.

“Hey,” Neil says quietly, settling back between Todd’s legs.

“Hi,” Todd whispers back, looking up to Neil and pushing some of the hair out of Neil’s eyes. Neil closes his eyes, reveling in the light touch of Todd’s fingers against his forehead. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Neil takes Todd’s hand down from where it’s pushing back Neil’s hair to kiss every one of his knuckles. Todd’s eyes close for a moment and Neil leans down to kiss him softly, gently biting his bottom lip.

Todd lets out a soft sound and can’t seem to manage a full sentence because all he breathes out is a gentle but desperate “ *Please* .”

“Yes, of course,” Neil says against his jaw. He lets his hands slip down to Todd’s hips. “I’ll take it slow.”

“I trust you,” Todd repeats, and Neil watches the rise and fall of his chest, before taking one of Todd’s hands in his own, letting their fingers intertwine. Neil looks at Todd and Todd looks back, looking so honest and open. But it goes both ways; Neil feels so vulnerable with Todd seeing all of him, with Todd wanting to do this with him, but he trusts Todd right back.

Todd can have this body. He can have Neil’s heart, every one of his bones, every place Neil has been that now lives in his skin. Let him take Neil back because Neil is his; Neil may be fucking Todd, but Neil is all Todd’s, not vice versa.

Every bit of him is Todd's. It's Todd who makes this home. It's Todd who lights the fire, whether it be in his wood-like bones, or his lower stomach, or this poor, beaten heart. Todd will keep him safe now.

Let Todd have this.

Neil keeps his promise; he takes it slow. He wants to be careful not to hurt Todd but Todd takes him easily. Neil can feel himself go breathless with the sensation.

"I love you," Todd says softly, eyelids fluttering, and Neil can see him physically relax with the overwhelming feeling. There is no trace of anxiety in his features; he's completely comfortable with Neil and he's so beautiful and vulnerable that Neil kind of wants to cry.

Neil kisses that place right under Todd's ear again, leaning a bit more into Todd which makes him let out a beautiful but obscene moan. "I love you too."

Neil whispers sweet everything's against the shell of Todd's ear the entire time. He reveals in the sounds Todd makes and the way he moves underneath Neil. The whole thing is slow and hot and it's pleasantly foggy from all the things Neil is feeling.

It's one of the best things Neil has ever experienced. But it's not just about the feeling; it's more about Todd. It's about the fact that Todd is here with him and it's all everything he wanted and more.

Todd finishes first, but not long after Neil follows. Their breaths are heavy and Neil is pretty sure he leaves his body for at least a good minute there but when he comes back to the world, he slowly leans down to kiss Todd. It's all so goddamn surreal and it almost seems like Todd can't reopen his eyes again but he feels Todd kiss him back, soft and exhausted. Todd keeps whispering little *love you* 's against Neil's lips and Neil returns every one.

Neil smiles softly at him, this boy he loves and presses a half-smile half kiss to Todd's jaw before collapsing beside him, satisfyingly tired. They both just lay there, breathing heavily for a long moment. Todd takes Neil's hand and fits his fingers perfectly between Neil's.

Neil looks over at Todd, whose eyes are still closed; Neil watches the softness of his profile as his body calms again. He loves Todd more than anything.

"Why the hell," Todd says quietly, still trying hard to catch his breath.

“Haven’t we been doing this for the past year?”

Neil laughs. And then Todd starts to laugh too and they’re both laying there, undressed, laughing, and so, so in love.

It takes a while for either of them to move, especially when Todd rolls closer to Neil and they just stay there, Neil kissing the top of his head and Todd’s fingers tracing shapes on Neil’s chest. But, eventually, Todd moves slightly to kiss Neil’s cheek and then starts to get up. “I’m going to take a shower if that’s alright?”

“Of course—“ Neil says, “You don’t have to ask.”

“Okay.” Todd can’t seem to stop grinning and it makes Neil’s heart so entirely soft for him.

“I’ll just be here,” Neil says, giving Todd a quick kiss.

Todd stops, halfway off the bed, and turns to Neil. “Do you want to—”

Neil realizes what he’s going to ask, but Neil doesn’t ask the question for Todd. He thinks Todd can ask for what he wants. And he does.

“Do you want to— come with me?”

Neil smiles at him. “Yeah, of course.”

And so he does.

“I feel bad for straight people,” Todd says later that night, unprompted. They’re cuddled in the hotel room bed, drinking shitty champagne, and watching another movie on Todd’s laptop.

Neil laughs. “I mean, me too but why?”

“No— just they can’t room with their significant other. I’m just glad that we’ll go back to school and— you’ll be right there.”

“I mean it’s highly recommended that gay couples don’t,” Neil says.

Todd looks down to where Neil’s arms are around his waist. “Oops.”

Neil smiles at him, laughing slightly. Todd grins back and presses a quick kiss to Neil's lips.

"I just like that—" Todd says quietly, eyes not quite meeting Neil's in his shy way. "I-I can always be home, you know?"

Neil's heart shatters most beautifully. He wants to save this moment; the sweet way Todd looks even if he won't quite look at Neil, the raw emotion in Todd's words. Neil wants to take this moment and tie it around his wrist as a reminder that above everything else, he is loved.

Todd is his home and Neil is Todd's too.

Neil uses one finger to very gently push Todd's chin up to look at him. When Neil speaks, his voice breaks just the slightest bit from emotion, and the way that his love pours for Todd.

"I love you, you know that?"

Todd looks overwhelmed by Neil's sweetness. Very gently, he leans forward to put a hand to Neil's jaw.

"I know— and I almost can't believe it. I look at you and— I'm in complete awe of you, Neil."

Neil holds his gaze. "I love you."

"I love you too," Todd says, pressing a kiss to Neil's jaw. Neil can feel the emotion growing in his chest and he won't cry over Todd again but he's so soft for him all the time that he can feel the tears behind his eyes.

"Thank you," Neil says instead.

"For what?"

Neil's answer is completely raw because Todd has his heart now; he has every part of Neil and Neil is so honored to be loved by him."For loving me."

Todd shakes his head, smiling softly. "Best decision I've ever made."

The next few days are a blur.

The next day they explore Boston a bit. They go ice-skating which Todd is surprisingly good at and Neil is completely awful at. They finally get a chance to go to a proper dinner together and then that night, they drive to stay with Meeks and Pitts for a night. Meeks and Pitts give Todd and Neil a little winter tour of Harvard and take them to the art museum and that night Neil and Todd go back to Vermont.

groupchat: **We All Wish We Were Walt Whitman**

Neil Perry

OKAY WHEN ARE YOU GUYS GOING TO BE BACK

Todd and I miss you guys

That Dipshit Nuwanda

And I thought you would forget about

us to pursue your lover :')

Neil Perry

Charlie i could never forget about you stfu

Even if i really, really wanted to

Daddy Pitts

Charlie why tf is your relationship with Neil

only like 10% less gay than neil's relationship with todd

That Dipshit Nuwanda

ALL BEST FRIENDS SHOULD BE A LITTLE BIT GAY

Neil Perry

Put that on my gravestone

Mama Meeks

That's why our friend group is Like This ™

We're all a little gay for each other

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Sksksksk

MUST YOU be Like This

Neil Perry

neil and i are good :)

currently just chilling in our dorm -todd

Daddy Pitts

just ;) chilling ;)

That Dipshit Nuwanda

;)))))))))))))

Neil Perry

Okay guys I'm back

you're embarrassing Toddd :(

Knoxious

tell him i apologise on behalf of all the poets

HI TODD WE LOVE YOU

Neil Perry

He says he loves you all too!

ALSO YOU GUYS NEVER ANSWERD
MY QUESTION
When will you all be back???

As it turns out, all the poets should be getting back at some point on New Year's Eve. Neil honestly isn't quite sure what they're going to do, but even though he's enjoying all the time alone with Todd, he does miss the poets.

That tends to happen with family.

The night before New Year's Eve, Neil and Todd spend most of the day in their dorm room. Todd works on his newest poem and Neil keeps sneaking peeks of it over his shoulder and of course, it's stunning. All of Todd's words are. Todd helps Neil practice lines for spring play auditions at the community theatre which is supposed to be putting on Much Ado About Nothing; Todd smiles a lot when he watches Neil act in a way that makes Neil feel invincible. They spend time talking and make another shitty batch of ramen, and it makes Neil's heart so soft.

Later that evening, Neil and Todd sleep together again, and for Neil, it's nearly as surreal as last time. Afterward, they're both too tired to go get properly dressed but Neil figures they'll deal with it all in the morning. They just tangle in Neil's bed; Todd puts his face into the crook of Neil's neck and everything is so tender. Neil is so in love.

But the craziest part?

Todd is too.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much! please leave kudos and comments, all are appreciated <3

Alcohol and Spring

Chapter Summary

in which the poets celebrate New Years'

Chapter Notes

hello dears!
i'm so sorry for the delay in this chapter; i've had a pretty big writer's block but HOPEFULLY, that's over and you all will forgive me since this is the longest chapter yet. i apologize in advance for all the kink jokes in this chapter though.
thank you to @aml13, the queen of knarlie, for not only beta-ing this fic but also being a huge consult when writing knarlie moments, in addition to helping with the ideas for a few of the presentations.
thank you SO MUCH for all the kind feedback! it's your kind comments that keep me writing and i absolutely adore you all.
much love,
auxctor
p.s. i think i've already mentioned this but i also have a tumblr now! my writing/fanfic one is @auxctor and my main one is @junenightsdream

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Neil supposes some things never change.

When the door to Neil and Todd's room slams open, Neil wakes from a dead sleep and sits up so quickly it gives him whiplash. Todd, who seems to have been slightly more conscious than Neil but not quite awake, rolls away from where he was cuddled into Neil with a startled "what?"

And there's the great Charlie Dalton, standing in the doorway, smiling his dumb smug smile. It's only then that he seems to realize that both Todd and Neil are in various states of undress from the previous night.

"Oooohooooo shit, did I—" Charlie says slowly, looking surprised but clearly trying not to laugh. "Were you guys fucking?"

"No!" Todd says as Neil rubs the sleep from his eyes and responds, "not *right now* we aren't "

Neil looks over to Todd, but when Todd rolled away from him he must have miscalculated somewhere because he's in a heap on the floor, half wrapped in Neil's sheet.

"Charlie, when'd you even get here?" Neil asks.

"I texted you guys last night that I was getting back pretty early in the morning."

Todd and Neil look at each other, with slightly guilty smiles. Charlie either doesn't notice or doesn't care enough to comment, and just comes to sit at the foot of Neil's bed; Todd stays put on the floor, wrapping the sheet better around his waist.

"So what are you guys up to?" Charlie asks. He lounges back on Neil's bed casually, as though he didn't just wake Neil and Todd up and decide to hold a casual conversation despite the two of them being mostly undressed.

"We *were* sleeping," Neil says, still confused with tiredness, "Wait but how are you… here? In our room? I swore to God I locked the door."

Charlie nods. "I know, Knox had your spare key and left it in our dorm. Todd lent it to him when he was staying in here?"

"Dammit Knox," Todd says quietly. He's still blushing, all his features tinged with red.

"What aren't you happy to see me? If I were you, I'd be *thrilled* ." Charlie pushes out his bottom lip, faking sadness.

"No, of course, we're excited to see you. Just we're half asleep and… not wearing pants."

Charlie gives a great, overdramatic wink. Neil throws a pillow at him and Todd laughs from his place on the floor.

"Well, Dalton, I swear I will be a great friend in about two hours but I'm going *the fuck* back to sleep," Neil says, laying back down and rolling back to face the wall. "Tell your boyfriend I say hi."

"He's not my boyfriend. And he's not here yet!"

Neil gets hit in the head with a pillow, so he flips up his middle finger in Charlie's general direction.

"Fine… I'll go see when Knox gets here. I think he should be here in

an hour or something?"

Neil feels Charlie's weight move from the bed. "Have fun. Use protection."

Neil knows without looking that Charlie's giving him a deadly glare. "Perry, you're the actual worst."

"Love you too."

Neil hears the door close behind a retreating Charlie and the bed shifts again as Todd moves back on it. He feels a soft kiss on the back of his bare shoulder.

"Hey there," Neil says quietly.

"Mm... hi," Todd responds, pressing a kiss to the base of Neil's neck. Neil sighs slightly and, even with Charlie Dalton bursting through the door at seven in the morning, Neil will never get over how much he loves waking up next to Todd. The late morning light from the dark winter is just starting to come through the window.

Neil feels kisses land along his back, across his shoulders, and he lets himself relax into Todd's soft and calculated touch. After a few minutes, he turns around to catch Todd's lips with his.

Soft fingers are lazy with the earliness of the hour and Neil relishes the sweet feeling of Todd's hand on his jaw. Todd's kisses are gentle and his hair is messy from sleep. Neil only breaks away to start pressing sweet kisses down the side of Todd's neck, which makes him make *that noise* again and God, Todd Anderson is going to be the death of him.

Neil doesn't end up going back to sleep.

It's on that afternoon when Neil takes Todd, Charlie, and Knox to lunch that his card is declined. When he tries to check online to see the problem, sure enough, his bank account has been closed and his card canceled; he knows he shouldn't be surprised. Neil knew his Dad was going to do it. He knew that his Dad wasn't magically going to get over everything Neil is. Neil has known since he cut off his father that his Dad wasn't just going to wake up and not be disgusted by what his son is and who his son loves.

But it still hurts.

His parents are no longer his parents.

Todd, Charlie, and Knox all understand what this means for Neil without him having to explain; they know this isn't about the money. When they offer to pay for his food Neil takes the offer, only hesitating for a moment. *It's okay to take the help* , he reminds himself. Even when they offer to talk about it, Neil doesn't want to talk about the fact that he's officially not part of his family, at least not yet, but even though it aches in all the worst places, it's good to know he has people to lean on.

The conversation carries on about school coming up and Neil tries not to let his mind wander too much. He tries to pay attention to Charlie's stories about the holidays with his family but he can't seem to break out of this prison of self-doubt that his father built for him, the snare he still gets caught in.

That's the kind of abuser his father was; no bruises or anything, all the injuries were invisible to the eye. There was no evidence. There was no crime scene. The only proof is the nightmares he's woken up with over the years, the sickness to his stomach, the self-hate, and the insistent sadness; this current all-consuming feeling of loathing for himself even though Neil knows that this was the right decision.

They finish up their lunch and start to walk back towards the dorm, Todd's hand in Neil's and Charlie flirting with Knox in such an obvious way that the romantic tension in the air is fucking painful. The snow has started to melt but only enough that it's turned to slightly grey mush. Neil tries to not keep letting his mind wander but it does, running off somewhere Neil can't catch it, reminding him that although telling his father off was a good thing, it did come at a price; in this weird way, he's realizing he *does* miss his father. Everything feels wrong without the constant weight in his chest, his father's ever-present pressure. Definitely better but still— wrong.

Neil doesn't notice that he and Todd have fallen behind Charlie and Knox until Todd speaks.

"Neil— are you okay?"

"What?" Neil looks up to find that Knox and Charlie are yards ahead of them. "Oh—"

Neil starts to say that he's fine but then—

“Not entirely,” he admits.

Todd looks at him, all soft gaze. “Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

Neil considers it a moment. “Maybe later. I’m trying not to think about my dad and I really don’t want to deal with it until after tonight.”

“What can I do?” Todd says. He’s nodding, understanding and Neil loves how their minds line up in all the right places.

“Being here is enough.” And it is. Besides, Todd and the poets are great distractions; Neil tries to ground himself, focusing on the feeling of Todd’s hand in his, the nip of the cold air. They start to walk again, now far behind Charlie and Knox, making their way through the darkening snow. The two of them walk in silence all the way back to the dorms until Todd stops with Neil right outside the doors, Charlie and Knox already having gone up to the dorm a while ago; Todd turns to face him, taking both of Neil’s hands.

“Hey— I love you, you know that, right?”

Neil smiles at him. “I know.”

Todd smiles and presses a quick kiss to Neil’s lips before pausing a moment to be serious, squeezing Neil’s hands with a sincere kind of caring, and Neil’s heart will forever ache for this honest touch. “You’re going to be okay.”

And Neil knows he’s right.

It’s a little past five and Knox and Charlie are still the only other poets that are back. Knox leaves with Todd so they can go get food for the small half new years party, half poets meeting they’re holding later that night; Neil is sitting on Knox’s bed as Charlie looks for alcohol in the deep depths of his mess of a closet; Neil still has no clue where Charlie gets it from. It’s then that Neil asks Charlie what has been on his mind since Knox came back.

“So— when are you telling Knox?” Neil asks Charlie. It’s hard not to ask; the awkward, full eye contact between them is honestly getting frustrating. Like goddamn, just fucking fall in love already.

Charlie looks around, as though afraid Knox will hear them even though he's not even in the fucking building. "I've got a plan."

"A plan?"

"A plan."

"Do I get to know any more?" Neil asks, eyebrow arched.

"No."

Neil laughs. "And why not?"

"Because it's not much of a plan, really. Just— wait and see."

Neil raises his eyebrows at Charlie. "Should I be concerned?"

"Nah." Charlie shakes his head and Neil watches as Charlie starts pulling bottle after bottle from his closet; seriously, how the hell does Charlie manage to get so much alcohol?

Neil thinks about this for a moment; God, he hopes Knox takes Charlie's feelings well. There's this slight worry in Neil's chest because Neil knows how much this means to Charlie, and if Knox rejects him, it will fucking crush him. Knox has said he has feelings for Charlie, Neil knows this, but Neil can't help but worry over them; Neil suddenly feels overwhelmed by emotion. He cares about his best friend so goddamn much.

"Charlie?"

"Yeah?"

Neil wants to tell him to be careful. He wants to tell Charlie how grateful he is to have Charlie in his life; he wants to let Charlie know how much Neil values their friendship. But the fact is, he knows Charlie doesn't want him to be serious. Neil knows that they're best friends; they have a silent understanding that they want each other to be alright. Maybe Neil doesn't need to speak it for Charlie to know.

So instead, Neil just laughs and says: "Looking back— was watching The Fault In Our Stars a euphemism? Were you guys fucking around?"

Charlie grins mischievously. "We did watch the movie. It was just more— Fault In Our Stars and chill."

Neil laughs. Sometimes the best things are left unsaid.

It's only a few minutes later that both Charlie and Neil's phones buzz with a text.

We All Wish We Were Walt Whitman

Mama Meeks

PITTS AND I JUST HAD AN IDEA
WE'RE REALLY BIG BRAINING TODAY

Daddy Pitts

YOU BET YOUR ASS WE'RE BIG BRAINING

Neil Perry

WHAT'S THE IDEA

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

Guys, the texting in all caps is getting really alaarming.

*alraming

**alarming

That Dipshit Nuwanda

TyPO

CEO of Dumb Bitch Energy

Literally, most of your texts are typos.

That Dipshit Nuwanda

TYPO TYPO TYPO

Mama Meeks

Okay so CONCEPT:

We do that thing where we make presentations

on a topic of our choice

We present tonight

Because why not

Neil Perry

HELL YEAH

That Dipshit Nuwanda

SIGN ME UP

“New plan!” Charlie says loudly, slamming his phone down on the desk. The smirk has made a great return on his face.

Neil raises his eyebrows, a smile already spreading across his lips. “What’s that?”

Charlie opens up his school bag, which is laying in the middle of Knox and Charlie’s dorm and pulls out his laptop.

“I know what I want to do for my presentation.”

When Charlie tells Neil his idea, Neil can’t stop laughing, but it’s brilliant. They settle down at Charlie’s desk and get to work on his computer.

When Knox and Todd come back, Charlie and Neil immediately banish them to Neil and Todd’s dorm to go work on their presentations. Neil is pretty sure Todd won’t make one, because even just in front of the

poets him speaking up is unlikely, but he figures he'll just help Knox with his.

For Neil's, he ends up deciding on doing a presentation on if each of the poets were a Shakespeare character; when he's done, he's rather pleased with himself. After he's helped Charlie finish up his own, Neil goes back to his dorm to get ready. Luckily, Knox has just finished his and leaves with a grin at Neil.

God, he has no clue what he's in for tonight .

They all agree to get dressed in their best, despite the fact it's just a casual evening of alcohol and presentations and wishing in the New Year. Neil has only seen Todd in a tie a handful of times, but tonight Todd wears one, and it nearly kills Neil.

Todd's just so fucking beautiful.

Neil just smiles at him for a long time as he ties his own tie and Todd turns slightly red under his affectionate gaze.

"What is it?" Todd asks quietly. Neil's collar must be a little messed up because Todd reaches up to fix it.

"I said it a while back but— you really are my favorite person."

Todd's face breaks out in a soft smile and he leans forward to kiss Neil for a long moment before responding.

"You've always been my favorite person. Since I met you."

Neil is surprised he doesn't melt into the floor at that; God, what an honor it is to be loved by Todd Anderson.

Cameron gets back less than a half an hour before Meeks and Pitts arrive together; as much shit as they all give Cameron for everything he does, Cameron a hundred percent commits to the whole "getting dressed in their best" thing by showing up in a whole ass tux and honestly? Neil is impressed.

As usual, they hold the meeting in Knox and Charlie's room. When Neil gets there, arm around Todd, everyone is already getting comfortable.

Meeks and Pitts are sitting at the edge of Knox's bed, already sipping drinks and laughing.

Knox is sitting on Charlie's bed, and Neil watches how he grins at Charlie as Charlie starts pouring everyone's drink. On the third one Charlie (who's clearly already had a few drinks himself) somehow manages to spill about half of the drink into his lap and all over the bedspread; this makes Cameron burst into laughter and Knox has to stop Charlie from throwing the still partly full cup at Cameron. But the whole time, Knox is looking at Charlie with the most adoring *you're-a-complete-and-absolute-dumbass* smile that Neil has ever seen in his goddamn life.

Yeah, Charlie and Knox are going to be just fine.

Todd and Neil fit themselves in their regular spot, between Knox and Charlie's bed.

"Hey, come here," Neil says, motioning for Todd to come closer.

"What?"

Neil pats the space in front of him and Todd grins as he sits in the space between Neil's legs. Neil wraps his arms around him; Todd sighs in this content way and yeah, Neil could get used to this.

When the time comes, Meeks helps Knox pull Charlie's desk out from the nook in the wall where it's crammed, and sets it in the front of the room so everyone can see the laptop sitting there.

Neil goes first with his presentation. All the poets like his presentation, laughing and grinning at all the right parts and God, Neil loves his poets more than anything else in this universe or any other universes that could ever possibly exist. By the end, Neil can't stop smiling and the poets clap before Neil goes back to sit with Todd like they were before he gave his presentation.

Meeks goes next. It takes him a couple of minutes to get set up.

What Everyone In This Room Would Go To Jail For

Meeks' presentation is well thought out and he has well thought out

reasoning for everyone. He goes through all the poets and the only one anyone tries to argue is Charlie's.

Nuwanda: For public sex

Charlie interrupts. “You can’t be arrested for public sex.”

“You can,” Pitts says.

“Yes, I did the research, bitch,” Meeks says, taking another sip of his drink and everyone makes various *oooooh* -ing noises like Meeks is being serious, which just makes both Meeks and Charlie laugh.

Cameron looks slightly uneasy as he sits down at Charlie’s desk to try and load up his presentation.

“Yes, our favorite signature straight, Richard Cameron!” Charlie says loudly. His voice is drunk and teasing but it makes something change in Cameron.

There's a long moment where Cameron looks at him, awkward and uncomfortable. “Actually… funny story.”

Cameron opens his presentation and moves away from the desk so that everyone can see the screen.

Why Coming Out is Too Complicated

By Richard Cameron

The poets look at each other, all raised eyebrows, and Todd turns slightly to share an understanding look with Neil. Then Cameron proceeds to spend the next fifteen minutes explaining why coming out is complete bullshit and why labels can, for some people, feel rather confining but how personally, he likes labels but it's so goddamn hard to find the right one. It’s not until he finishes and the room goes silent, what Neil assumes is everyone making an opening for Cameron to say what he seems to be itching to say, that Charlie pipes up.

“So what you’re trying to say is—?”

He's teasing slightly and Cameron, who’s been sitting there awkwardly since his presentation flipped to the final slide, clearly trying to find the courage to explain the presentation, explain himself, glares at Charlie. “Charlie, is there any way you could not be you for five minutes?”

“Oh—” Charlie says, looking taken aback. “Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

There are a few more tense moments and Cameron looks desperately at Neil; Neil gives him an encouraging nod, understanding. Cameron nods back. Everyone looks to Neil but then Cameron says—

“I’m not straight.”

No one seems to know what to say to that, so Cameron goes on. It comes out a ramble as though he prepared this all well but has completely forgotten everything he was planning on saying.

“I’m gay. Or well— gay but asexual. Romantically, I just like guys; I thought I might like girls and be bi or something but I’m slowly realizing— I’m wrong. I’ve been thinking it for a while but I—”

He keeps going on and on and, somewhere into his tenth or eleventh sentence, Neil can tell that he desperately needs someone to cut him the hell off because he’s just rambling now.

“Thank you for telling us,” Neil says, effectively putting Cameron out of his misery. Cameron looks completely and utterly relieved.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm gay." Cameron nods. "So that's a thing."

Everyone gives Cameron varying words of encouragement which Cameron seems to appreciate, and Neil is so happy that they are helping erase the insecurity so present in Cameron's features.

Knox smiles at Cameron, at some point when everyone else has died down and raises his cup. “To Cameron and his queerness."

Neil swears he sees Cameron try to subtly wipe his slightly wet eyes with his sleeve, and Neil feels so deeply for what Cameron's going through. He knows what it's like to come out after growing up being told what you are is wrong.

Pitts goes next with a presentation about Star Wars that Neil doesn’t

completely follow (Neil has only seen one and a half of the Star Wars movies but he will not, by any means, let Pitts know that) and Knox follows Pitts.

Knox can't help but grin when he pulls his up:

Why Simping is Not Necessarily a Bad Thing

Everyone breaks out in laughter, and Knox proceeds. He seems happy with his presentation but he very clearly tries to avoid Charlie's gaze as he gives it; at least until one of his last slides. Knox's eyes meet Charlie's. Mid-laugh, everything seems to pause, this sincere kind of sadness taking up space in Knox's smile.

Neil wants to throw something at Charlie. Because of course Knox is upset, Knox still doesn't know how Charlie feels, and Charlie just needs to do his fucking presentation already because that slight sadness in Knox's eyes is fucking agonizing.

As soon as Knox is done, Neil is quick to speak up.

"Dalton, your turn," Neil urges.

"Oh. Oh yeah."

Charlie, for a fraction of a second, looks almost nervous as he gets to his feet. He very obviously avoids Knox's gaze as he opens up his presentation.

KNOX OVERSTREET'S 12 BEST QUALITIES

Everyone turns to look at Knox as soon as they read the title, who happens to take that exact moment to take a drink from his cup. He notices everyone looking at him before he notices Charlie's presentation.

"What—?" Before he can finish, he reads the title and slops his drink down his front.

Once he gets himself together, Knox just looks at Charlie, lips slightly parted in a small *oh* . Charlie looks back at him with this vulnerable, open gaze that's so un-Charlie Dalton. That small look screams so many truths and seems to say: *see, this is what has been making me act differently. This is why I've been afraid . I've been scared of all these things I feel for you.*

As soon as the honesty in Charlie's features appears it's gone, and he turns back to his presentation with his smirk to flip to the first slide:

1) His stupid ass bowl haircut

Knox laughs the loudest as Charlie goes into a further explanation about the first point and is quick to defend himself once Charlie's finished. "Listen— it's not supposed to be a bowl haircut. It just looks like that sometimes—"

2) How he ties his sweaters around his neck like a fucking dork

3) The way he says "white"

"Is this entire list just you bullying me?"

Charlie grins at Knox. "Not *entirely* ."

"Wait, how does Knox say white?" Meeks asks.

"He pronounces the *h* in it."

"How the hell do you pronounce the *h* ?"

“When he does it almost sounds like *hhwite* , and it’s *disgusting* ," Charlie says. Knox feigns offense but he's laughing.

4) His laugh (… just pretend that’s not cheesy)

Knox looks suddenly emotional as Charlie explains how much he adores Knox's laugh. The whole room falls into a sweet silence and Knox’s features seem to be going soft for Charlie.

5) His sense of humor

6) The fact he’s a hopeless romantic

7) He gives good hugs

The poets can't help but "aw" out loud at those ones and Knox is looking at Charlie like he's the only person who's ever mattered. Neil's heart aches for the two of them and, in a moment of appreciation for the mere enigma that is love, he kisses Todd's cheek.

8) He always cleans up after my messes (literally and figuratively)

9) The look on his face when he gets excited about something????

Neil can almost see Knox falling more in love with Charlie.

10) How he always ends up agreeing to go along with my bullshit

Neil is pretty sure Charlie is falling more in love with Knox right back.

11) His dick sucking lips

Everyone laughs at that; Neil looks over at Knox whose face is red but he's laughing too.

Charlie goes on. "He's a good kisser too but— I didn't have enough points to make that its own so I thought it could fit under this one. And last but not least—"

12) He's just as kinky as I am ;)

The room dissolves into fucking chaos at the last slide; Meeks and Pitts are screaming, Cameron has the ultimate look of disappointment on his face, Todd just looks startled by the entire situation and Neil and Charlie are just sitting there laughing during it all.

Knox seems to be completely speechless.

"Do we *want* to know more?" Pitts asks, raising his eyebrows

suggestively.

“What, do you want a bulleted list?” Charlie asks, smirking mischievously. Before anyone could get so much as a protest, he goes on. “There’s a tasteful daddy kink, to start. Uh… a little choking. He likes when I—”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Charlie, stop talking,” Knox all but groans, not lifting his head from where they’re buried behind his hands. “ *Please* .”

It takes a long time for the room to quiet down after that. Everyone else is laughing ridiculously hard now, and Neil’s sides hurt from laughter.

“Well, now that we know *way* too much about Knox and Charlie’s sex life—” Meeks says, and Meeks and Cameron share a panicked asexual look of solidarity. “Is that everyone, then?”

“No. I made one,” Todd says quietly.

Neil tries not to act too surprised. He expected, like reading, the presentation is something Todd would just opt-out of. But here he is.

Todd gets to his feet, a little shakily and Neil puts a quick and comforting hand on his arm. He can tell that this is a step out of Todd's comfort zone and so he grins and mouths a small *you're gonna do great.* Todd smiles back.

The Top Ten Poets In History Ranked By Gayness

By Todd Anderson

Number Ten: Shakespeare

Todd keeps having to stop because one of the poets will start to laugh and he’ll burst into his own fit of laughter. His laugh makes Neil feel even softer and he watches Todd give his presentation with his elbows on his thighs and chin in palm.

As Todd goes on, he seems to grow more comfortable and relaxes into

his own humor. Seeing Todd relax is more beautiful than anything Neil's ever seen; when Todd is peaceful, Neil wants to thank his anxiety for taking a brief rest.

Number Six: Allen Ginsberg

Neil always forgets what a good sense of humor Todd has in front of the rest of the poets since he always falls quiet from shyness, and it's good to see Todd getting to be himself, the stunning person Neil always gets to see when they're alone.

Number Two: Oscar Wilde

Todd is very clearly trying not to laugh when he flips to the final slide:

Number One: Neil Perry

Everyone erupts into laughter and Todd catches Neil's eye, both of them smiling so widely it hurts. Neil loves him so much and he wants to spend the rest of his goddamn life seeing that sweet like summer smile.

Todd is wearing this proud little grin that makes Neil feel unstoppable when he sits down, back in front of Neil.

He's slightly red so Neil leans forward to kiss Todd's blush.

"You really put me ahead of Oscar Wilde? With what a shit writer I am… "

Todd grins back at him. "What you lack in writing skills you make up for in gayness."

Everyone is looking at them and Neil laughs, and it's only when the poets turn their attention to Knox and Charlie, who have gotten to

their feet, that Neil whispers a soft *I love you* in Todd's hair. Neil watches Todd's smile widen.

Knox glances at Charlie where they're standing awkwardly, then at all the poets. “If you’ll excuse us— Charlie and I need to go talk.”

Neil is pretty sure Pitts is the first person to wolf-whistle but soon they’re all making various whistling noises and suggestive comments, heavy with euphemism; Knox rolls his eyes and then takes Charlie by the wrist to start out the door. Charlie gives everyone the finger over his shoulder as they leave. The teasing falls silent once they’re gone and surprisingly, Todd’s the first one to speak.

“Damn,” Todd says quietly. “They’re going to go fuck in our dorm, aren’t they?”

Everyone bursts into another round of laughter.

It's almost an hour later when Knox and Charlie come back. They're barely through the doorway, their hair messier than it had been when they left, Neil says, as casually as possible, because it’s his life mission to tease the hell out of Charlie:

“Hey Charlie, hey *daddy* ,”

All the poets start laughing all over again.

“I told you all that in *confidence,”* Charlie gasps, feigning offense, at the same time Knox goes “I literally hate you all.”

“Oh no, is daddy gonna punish us?”

Knox turns completely red. “I— after tonight, I’m not talking to any of you ever again.”

But Charlie is laughing too, and he grins at Knox until he rolls his eyes and breaks into a smile as well.

It's later in the evening when Neil catches the conversation. All of the poets have split into their own conversations, and Neil is talking to a tipsy Todd and a widely grinning Knox when he overhears Charlie talking to Cameron.

“Hey, Cameron, sorry for giving you— a hard time earlier. I know I was kind of teasing; I didn’t realize it wasn’t the right moment.”

Cameron looks completely confused and slightly suspicious. “Are you — are you fucking with me?”

“Nah; I thought I’d try the whole being a decent fucking human being thing.” Charlie shrugs casually, as though this isn't a huge step for him.

Cameron doesn't seem to know what to do with any of this new information. But then Charlie turns away and puts an arm around Knox as he joins their conversation, and that's the end of that. Neil sends Charlie what he hopes is an encouraging smile and Charlie smiles right back.

Later that night, they set up Charlie’s laptop on the desk, so they can watch the ball drop in New York City. The rest of the night flies by and before Neil knows it, they're counting in the new year.

10

All the poets are excited, all slightly tipsy from alcohol. They're grinning widely and Neil realizes how god damn lucky he is to have friends like the poets.

9, 8

Neil thinks for a moment about his father, halfway across the country. He's probably asleep but he'll be waking up to a new year just like Neil. But this time it won't be a year with Neil in it; it won't be another year that Neil's father can make him feel hopeless.

7,6,5

Neil looks over at Todd. His beautiful, stunning Todd and he thinks about how long he's been in love with him. He's loved Todd since the very beginning, he's loved Todd despite everything that's tried to break Neil's bones and now, Todd loves him back.

He is going into the new year with Todd, and something about that thought makes him feel invincible.

4,3

And here are his poets. His best friends; the people who kept him alive

when he thought there was nothing worth living for.

2

This will be a good year. Neil swears on it.

1

The sounds of cheers come from the laptop, of celebrations all the way from New York, and all the poets whoop and Neil looks back at Todd. Todd's already looking at him. They both smile at each other for a moment, because this means a new beginning. And then Neil leans forward and kisses Todd, sweet and optimistic, the sound of midnight ringing through the small dorm; Todd tastes like alcohol and spring, and Neil's hands fit naturally around his waist. Neil tries to pay no attention to the poets who are wolf-whistling and just being generally, lovingly obnoxious, but Neil can't help but smile. Neil flips up his middle finger at them and Todd laughs softly into his lips.

When Neil pulls away he just smiles at Todd for a moment before he catches them out of the corner of his eye.

Knox and Charlie, who at some point seated themselves under Knox's desk in the corner of the room, are kissing.

Pitts catches sight of them just a moment after Neil, and immediately starts clapping so than Neil wolf-whistles, causing Charlie and Knox to pull away from each other. When Knox pulls back he hits his head on the underside of the desk, hard, and starts swearing profusely while Charlie tries not to laugh. He fails and lets out a loud snicker which just makes Knox glare at him.

But then Charlie leans forward to kiss him one more time, not giving a damn that anyone's watching.

When they separate again, Knox is red and Neil sees that Charlie is a little flushed too but Charlie, forever shameless, gets to his feet to take a big bow; Knox puts his face in his hands, but he's laughing.

It's a little past one when Neil asks Charlie. Charlie's standing in the corner, leaning against the desk he and Knox had been kissing under just an hour ago. Neil comes over to stand next to him.

"So are you guys boyfriends then? You finally talked about it?"

Charlie smiles into his cup before saying, in what Neil might even call a *shy* tone which he's never heard Charlie use before:

"Yeah. Yeah, he is."

Neil grins at him and bumps his elbow into Charlie's. "Congrats."

"Knox Overstreet is my boyfriend," Charlie says like he still can't quite believe it.

They watch Todd and Knox, who are in some debate with Meeks about which Harry Potter characters are the gayest. Todd is somewhat drunk; he's talking slightly louder than he normally does and his laugh is just a bit more giggly than usual, and it makes Neil grin. His blond hair is a little messy but his tie is still perfectly knotted, and Neil loves every soft angle of him, the slight curve of his spine as he leans forward to listen to Meeks' counter-argument, and it's honestly insane how much he loves Todd Anderson

Neil glances over at Charlie; Charlie has this sweet look of complete affection as he looks at Knox and Neil knows he's thinking the exact same thing about Knox that Neil is about Todd.

Neil makes sure everyone is still deep in conversation before lowering his voice and speaking again to Charlie.

"You deserve him, you know."

Charlie doesn't so much as turn his head to look at Neil, but Neil can tell by the slight shift in his posture that he needed to hear it. His shoulders relax just a bit and he sees the corners of Charlie's smirky grin tug up further.

"Thanks, Neil."

Neil just nods. "Of course."

Charlie won't take his eyes off Knox like he's an eclipse, and Charlie's afraid that if he looks away, he'll miss Knox completely. Neil has never seen Charlie as honest as he looks when he has his eyes on Knox, and something about finally seeing Charlie, his best friend and the most wonderful yet most emotionally ill-equipped individual Neil knows, finally finding someone who makes his cocky grin look soft that is completely amazing.

Neil settles to sit on Knox's desk after Charlie goes to talk to Knox, and

Todd, working through another drink, comes back over to sit next to him. Todd doesn't normally drink much at meetings and something about the fact that Todd is relaxed enough to let himself go and have some fun makes Neil smile, and he slows down on his own drink, just in case Todd needs any help to bed in an hour or so.

Todd immediately lets his head fall on Neil's shoulder and Neil wraps his arm around his waist; they don't need to say anything to each other to feel the new years' excitement and the hope that another year offers. Neil doesn't need to use his words to say how content he is right now, here with his boyfriend and his best friends, but he knows Todd can feel Neil's joy. It's after a few minutes of them just resting next to each other, finding peace in the party, that Todd speaks:

"Wait—your dad— threw out all of our old polaroids, right?"

Neil is caught off guard by the seemingly random question as he recalls, back at the beginning of the semester, when his Dad had thrown out the box of some of his most important belongings. "Yeah, he did."

"Um… one sec—" Todd gets up, setting down his drink, and leaves the room without further explanation.

Knox seems to be the first person to notice Todd leaving. "Where is he going?"

Neil looks at the door where it closed behind Todd. He worries slightly because even though Todd can't be going far, he's slightly drunk. "I have absolutely no idea. Should I go after him?"

"Eh—" Charlie says from where he's now laying on his bed, head in Knox's lap. "If we hear him fall down the stairs, then you can follow."

"That's comforting."

"Maybe just give him ten minutes? And if he's not back, go see if he's okay?" Knox suggests.

Less than five minutes later, the door swings open, and there's Todd. At first, Neil doesn't notice it but then he catches it hanging around Todd's neck—

He has— Jeffery's polaroid camera.

"He said I-I could keep it," Todd says, coming over to Neil, to set it

down and reload the film. “I thought we could take a few tonight.”

“Why?” Neil asks. He knows why, but he’s so fucking touched by the gesture that he doesn’t know what else to say.

“Now— you can start a new collection of pictures,” Todd says quietly, “Of us.”

And Neil kisses him.

More drinks are had and terrible jokes are told and it’s about four in the morning when Knox is the first one to pass out. Neil’s tipsy-ness has died down when the meeting comes to an end, which he’s thankful for because someone needs to help a too-drunk Todd to their dorm.

“Hey, ‘Wanda? I’ll be back in a few to make sure everyone’s got a place to sleep; I’m going to get him to bed,” Neil says to Charlie, nodding to Todd, who is leaning heavily against Knox’s desk, looking shitfaced and sleepy. Charlie nods and smiles from his bed, where he has Knox asleep on his shoulder, and damn, he’s never seen Charlie so — calm? Content? Just so goddamn happy?

Neil gets an arm around Todd’s waist, and pulls Todd’s arm over his shoulders.“Up you go—”

Todd leans into him, slightly giggly, and it makes Neil smile.

It’s a time trying to get Todd down the stairs, but in the past Neil has had to help Charlie walk when he’s drunk which has always been a pain because Charlie doesn’t fucking listen and always wants to go for another drink instead of going to fucking bed, so in comparison Todd is easy, just absent-mindedly coming along with him. His feet stumble slightly but Neil keeps him steady.

When they reach the dorm, Neil uses his shoulder to push it open, and he gets Todd sitting on the edge of his bed. Neil helps Todd out of his shoe and undoes his tie for him. Todd watches him, hand on his arm, looking almost fascinated, and God, Neil has only seen Todd this drunk once before, last year during Charlie’s birthday.

“I like you in a tie—“ Todd says softly, slurring slightly, running his hands over Neil’s chest as Neil unbuttons Todd’s shirt. “You look pretty—”

Neil grins at him and kisses his cheek. He gets up to go undo his own tie and is just about to go back to Knox and Charlie's dorm when Todd interrupts him.

"Neil—" Todd says insistently, words slow and slippery with alcohol as he waves Neil over. " *Come to bed* ."

Neil does come over but just to lean down and kiss his cheek. "I'm going to go make sure Pitts and Meeks have a place to sleep, okay? Then I'll be right back."

"Imissyou," Todd says, his words stringing together.

"I'm right here."

Todd reaches up to push his hand through Neil's hair, frowning slightly. "But you're leaving."

"I said I'm coming right back." Neil smiles at him.

"And then you'll stay?"

"Yes, of course," Neil says. Todd continues to look up at him where he's still laying in Neil's bed, smile still soft and drunk and slightly confused. His fingers are still gentle in Neil's hair.

"Can you stay forever after that?"

Neil's chest gets fireworks. He knows Todd's just drunk, but something about the question sets Neil alight.

He leans forward to kiss Todd, the lighthouse he will always come home to. Todd kisses him a little haphazardly, probably slightly blurry from drunkenness, but his lips are still gentle and sweet and he tastes like champagne.

"Yeah," Neil nods once he pulls away. "I can stay forever."

Todd smiles, seemingly satisfied now that he knows this, eyes soft and tired. He's compliant as Neil tells him to lay down and pulls the blanket over him, and Todd makes this sweet appreciative sound in his throat that makes Neil melt. His eyes fall closed, and Neil kisses his head once more before going back to Knox and Charlie's room.

Cameron, Pitts, and Meeks are all starting down to Cameron's room when Neil reaches their room.

“Do you guys have a place to sleep?” Neil asks.

“Yeah,” Pitts says, “Meeks ‘nd I are just going to sleep on the floor in Cameron’s room.”

“Well… Todd and I sleep in the same bed so, if one of you guys want to take his—”

“It’s alright.”

“Seriously, Todd and I have an empty bed,” Neil insists. “And I’m sure Knox and Charlie will be sleeping in the same bed too—”

“No, no,” Meeks says, grinning. “We want all the boyfriends to have some privacy.”

Neil wants to continue to argue, but leave it to Meeks and Pitts to be fine sleeping on the floor for the sake of “the boyfriends”. He walks them down to Cameron’s room anyway, helping Pitts with a pretty drunk Cameron.

When they all get settled, Neil wishes them all a good night. He’s about to leave when he pauses. Neil turns around, hand on the doorframe, and says one last thing before leaving.

“By the way— I’m proud of you, Cameron.”

Cameron looks like he might cry in his drunk state and it’s only then that Neil realizes how little he really knows about Cameron’s personal life, about his family and anyone else who could have made Richard Cameron feel this way about his sexuality; he adds *getting to know Richard Cameron better* to his mental list of things he wants to do this year.

“Thanks, Neil.”

Neil goes to say one last goodnight to Knox and Charlie. Their dorm is still a mess from the meeting, Charlie’s desk out of place, cups and chip bags strewn about the floor, but he figures they’ll clean it up in the morning. Charlie is still awake when Neil knocks on the door, and he’s the one who calls *come in* to Neil.

Charlie is in Knox’s bed with Knox asleep next to him, head on Charlie’s shoulder. Charlie looks so content there and it makes Neil endlessly happy to see that finally, Charlie and Knox are figuring it out.

“Well, I just wanted to say goodnight,” Neil says and then he nods slightly at where Knox is tucked into Charlie’s side. “I’m really happy for you guys.

Charlie can’t seem to stop smiling.

“Happy New Year,” Neil grins back at him, and Neil is so goddamn happy that he has Charlie in his life.

“Can you shut the door behind you?” Charlie asks, clearly not wanting to move.

“Goodnight Nuwanda.”

“ ‘Night Perry.”

Neil eases the door shut behind him.

When Neil gets back to the dorm, Todd is half asleep, entirely curled up in Neil’s comforter. Even in his tired, drunken state, he’s remembered to leave room for Neil next to him in the bed, and Neil’s heart feels comfortable in his chest with the knowledge that Todd leaving space for Neil is just natural to him now.

Neil turns off the light and then, after shrugging off his button-up, settles next to Todd.

Todd surprises him by speaking. “Hi.”

“I love you,” Neil says softly, kissing his forehead.

“Mmmmm,” Todd says, still a bit drunkenly confused. “Good for you.”

Neil can’t help but laugh; Jesus, he loves Todd. His laugh wakes up Todd a bit because then Todd is pulling him down into a sweet and lazy kiss.

“Okay, you need to sleep,” Neil tells him after a moment. “You're not going to feel so great tomorrow.”

Todd nods and buries his face into Neil’s t-shirt, mumbling something Neil can’t quite decipher.

“What’s that?” Neil whispers.

“ ‘Said— I love you too.”

Neil uses a hand to smooth down Todd's hair and kisses the top of his head, his presence making everything in Neil feel warm and hopeful. Todd is his best friend and his boyfriend and makes everything that's happened with his dad feel like a less demanding burden. The ghost of his father, of all the trauma Neil has gone through in the past 18 years, will still be with him, but tonight proved something to Neil. Tonight proved that he will always have people who make him feel whole, who makes him feel like he's something less broken; someone worth being loved.

And here he is with Todd. He will forever be Neil's steady heartbeat.

This year, he can have all this. He can have his heart, and his friends, and his acting dream, and this new home.

Neil carefully leans over to pick a polaroid they took up off the windowsill while still holding a sleeping Todd to his chest with his other arm.

The picture is just a little blurry from the way Todd's hands shake, but just barely. He can still see all his poets and their wide smiles and all the champagne makes Neil's chest warm; it's going to be a good year. Todd's breath is heavy, he's already fast asleep, and Neil feels safe being back in his bed, Todd beside him.

"Happy New Year, Todd," Neil whispers, even if Todd can't hear him in his sleep.

Even if he doesn't have his father, he still has a family.

Chapter End Notes

thank you SO MUCH for reading! i hope you enjoyed, and please remember to leave comments and kudos <3

And So On

Chapter Summary

in which Neil is finally happy

Chapter Notes

i apologize in advance for this long author's note but i have a lot to say so here we go!
first things first, thank you so much for your patience. i'm just now finishing up finals week at university so i've been low on Speak Low energy until the last few days. but finally! i've done it. i actually can't believe this is the last chapter of speak low? this project has been my life for the past five months or so and it's crazy to me that i've actually completed it. but writing this has been such a good time and i'm so proud that it's a thing i've created :')
even though Speak Low is mostly over (there may or may not be an epilogue coming in the near future) i assure you, i will still be writing more DPS content! i have many more plans for fics [as you can see, it now says that Speak Low is part of a series ;)], but i'm not sure which project i'll be pursuing next. if you want to get writing updates from me, i post quite a bit over @auxctor on tumblr. :)
now some quick appreciation:
thank you so much to my beta and friend @aml13. i could not have done this without them helping me with fic ideas, proofing my chapters, and working on fics with me at 3am over facetime. i know i've thanked them in every chapter, but i really cannot thank them enough; they are the best and i owe them loads! they have an amazing knarlie fic, If I Needed Someone, that you should def check out as well!
AND THEN FINALLY thank you so much to all of you for reading this fic. all your comments and encouragement never fail to make my day better, and i'm so honored that so many people have read and loved this fic. you all are the absolute best!
thank you so so much for sticking with me for 16 chapters <3
yours,
Bug (auxctor)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The truth of the situation is this; there is no easy way to tell someone

you love them.

Even though Neil knows that Todd loves him back, Neil still feels the slight worry of his heart when he says it; he still has little moments where he loses his words around Todd, even though Neil is supposed to be the confident one. The fearless one. He's supposed to lack hesitance but sometimes he still finds himself stuck.

Because now that he has Todd, he could lose him.

But, although it may be a nerve-wracking thing to love a boy— love *this* boy— he decides on the morning of the first day of the new year, that he doesn't care.

Neil can start this new life now and Todd can be his; he wants to tell Todd he loves him every moment he can.

“Ugggghhhhhh…”

Neil looks up from his laptop where he’s been looking through his audition script for the spring production to see Todd in his bed, throwing his arm over his eyes. Neil loses his words for a moment because there’s something about seeing him in the morning, seeing his boyfriend so soft and vulnerable, that makes his heart feel full. No matter how hungover he may be.

“Good morning, love.” Neil grins at him once he finally finds the right language.

“A little quieter, Neil,” Todd practically groans, rolling over to bury his face in Neil’s pillow. “Can you please shut the blinds?”

Neil comes over to shut the blinds and then leans down to kiss the top of Todd’s head. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel like— I feel like I’m dying.”

“Nauseous?”

“Nauseous and dizzy and my head fucking *hurts* .”

Sometimes it’s hard to tell someone you love them, even when you know they’ll say it back; but there are other ways to say it. “Want me to get you a bottle of water and some Advil?”

Todd lifts his face from his arm to look at Neil. “Neil Perry— you are the love of my life.”

Neil laughs but Todd reaches up to cover his mouth.

“Still too loud.”

Neil takes the opportunity to kiss his palm. “Okay, let me go get you water.”

When Neil comes back with water and medicine, Neil sits on the edge of the bed. Todd is clearly grateful, but as soon as he sits up he buries his face in Neil’s shoulder.

“God, everything's spinning—“

Neil kisses the top of his head and pushes some of the hair out of Todd's face. He tries to keep his voice quiet when he speaks to not irritate Todd's headache. "Should I have made you slow down on the beer?”

Neil watches Todd smile as he pulls away to take the pills. “No— 's okay. Just forgot how shit being hungover is.”

“Yeah,” Neil says softly. He lays down, and motions to Todd. Todd seems glad to not be sitting up anymore and Neil takes his hand; they both just stay like that for a while, looking at each other, until Todd has to close his eyes, presumably from nausea.

“Maybe you should sleep,” Neil suggests.

Todd sighs quietly and moves closer to Neil. “Probably will.”

Neil kisses his cheek before pulling him closer so Todd can bury his face in Neil’s neck. "You're beautiful."

“ 'M hungover,” Todd says with a slight laugh, voice muffled by fabric.

“The point stands.”

Todd shakes his head but Neil feels him smile. They stay like that for a long time, Neil’s fingers in Todd’s hair and steady, tired breaths. It’s not until an hour later that Neil starts to get up to leave, having promised he'd have lunch with Pitts and Meeks, the only other poets who didn't drink like it was their last night on Earth. He's halfway out of bed when Todd speaks.

“You said you’d stay forever," Todd whispers.

Neil smiles softly over at him. “You remember that?”

“Yeah.”

Neil’s voice comes out gentle and vulnerable.

“I meant it. I want this for a long time.” He motions between them to show which *this* he's indicating and Todd looks sweetly back at him, placing a soft hand on Neil's cheek

“We’ll talk about it more when I-I don’t feel like shit but Neil?”

“Yeah?”

“I want that too,” Todd leans forward to kiss his cheek before laying back down and rolling away to go back to sleep. Neil smiles at him for a moment, heart alight, and pulls the blanket fully over Todd before kissing the top of his head.

“Sleep well."

He gets up to leave, grabbing keys off his desk; he takes one last look at Todd, his love, the person who makes Neil's passionate, full heart bleed and just takes him in for a minute.

All of this is his; sleeping next to Todd and bringing him water when he's hungover and lazy Sunday mornings. Not Christmas-y holidays and slow sex and walking through parks in the snow. Stupid jokes and polaroids. Plays and poetry and all his friends.

It's all Neil's. And he loves every bit of it.

Todd spends most of January 1st sleeping off his hangover. Neil comes back to nap with him in the late afternoon after lunch and then goes to see Knox and Charlie later that evening. Neither Charlie nor Knox are as hungover as Neil expected, and so they talk for a while about anything and everything. Charlie can't seem to let go where he has his fingers intertwined with Knox's, and seeing them together makes Neil grin.

“Wait, random question," Charlie interjects halfway through some story Knox is telling about the holidays with his family. "Neil, you and Todd sleep in your bed, right?”

Neil raises his eyebrows curiously. “Yeah, why?”

“Well—” Knox starts but seems to lose the words of what he’s going to say because he looks guiltily over at Charlie, as though asking him to answer instead.

“Because after Knox and I talked out our feelings, we kind of—” Charlie trails off and starts to wiggle his eyebrows.

“Wait— did you fuck in my bed?” Neil doesn't even know how to react.

“No, no. We fucked in Todd’s bed, that’s why Charlie asked—“

Neil lets out an exasperated sigh and looks to Charlie. “You seriously fucked Knox in Todd’s bed?”

“Well, *technically* Knox fucked me in Todd’s bed— *major* difference.”

And Neil can’t help himself; he erupts into laughter. Then Charlie and Knox are laughing and they’re both so goddamn ridiculous, but they’re two of Neil’s favorite people.

"You guys are the actual worst," Neil says, but he doesn't mean it one god damn bit, and they all know it.

The day after, Neil goes to change his phone number. He’s pretty sure his father won’t call since he hasn’t already, but it’s some type of precaution. It’s a way to put extra distance between himself and his father, all on his own.

Getting a new number is his own way of taking back power.

Todd comes with him and, now that he’s another night away from New Years Day, he seems to have recovered from his hangover. He holds Neil’s hand the whole time, because this is all part of something that slices much deeper for Neil, and Neil is so grateful for him.

They spend the rest of the day at the bookstore and then somehow, on their walk home, end up trying to race the six or seven blocks back to their dorm. Around block four, Todd slips and falls hard onto the icy sidewalk, but he's laughing so hard that Neil doesn't feel too badly. His palms are scraped from the pavement and he insists that he's fine, he's nineteen and can handle a little slip on the ice, but Neil still insists on kissing his palms like they're much younger than they are,

and it makes Todd grin. Todd keeps stuttering sweet 'I love yous' that night even though his anxiety is higher than usual and Neil tells him he loves him until the words make a home between his lips, and he talks to Todd in the dark when Todd can't find his words anymore. Todd's palms are still stinging and raw, but he laughs all the same.

The day is chaotic and lovely and messy just like the two of them, and it's one of those good days that, despite not being anything too special, means everything to Neil.

Neil decides to take it upon himself to take Todd to his first psychiatry appointment over a week later. Todd keeps insisting that Neil shouldn't bother.

"Neil, you don't need to. I can just take the bus, it's really not— Neil —"

But Neil doesn't mind; it just means more time with Todd and while Todd's in the actual appointment, it will be the only chance Neil ever gets to do school work where it's truly quiet (Charlie still insists on bursting into their dorm at the most inconvenient moments).

And that's how he ends up driving the twenty minutes across town with Todd in the passenger seat. Todd isn't talking much; Neil knows it's the anxiety of being somewhere he's never been and talking about feelings with people he's never met. But when they pull into the parking lot, Neil sees that Todd's gone paler.

"Hey; it's going to be okay. They're just going to try and help."

Todd nods and Neil parks his car; they have a few minutes before Todd needs to go in. The two of them sit in silence and Neil can hear Todd's breathing speed up.

"I-I know they're going to try and help," Todd puts his hand to his chest. "I feel like I-I shouldn't be anxious. God, my heart is beating so fast."

Neil would tear out his own heart to give Todd one that works instead of worries.

"It's okay to be anxious. Just it's going to be alright, yeah?"

Todd looks like he's going to be sick. "Yeah."

They sit in silence; Neil watches the clock, knowing Todd's going to be a tad bit late but knowing that Todd needs to go at his own pace.

"Okay. Okay— "

It takes a few more minutes but eventually, Todd squeezes Neil's hand.

"I'm ready."

When they get inside, Neil helps Todd check-in and sits with him as they wait for the psychiatrist. Todd had grabbed Neil's hand again once they headed in and Neil squeezes it back, Todd's fingers laced with Neil's. Neil tries to distract him and tries to talk about classes they'll be taking this semester to get Todd's mind somewhere else, but he can tell Todd can't think about anything else.

They're only sitting there for about three more minutes when a woman comes out to the lobby and reads the name off the clipboard in her hands.

"Todd Anderson."

Todd looks like an animal who's well aware he's headed to his slaughter and Neil loves him, but he doesn't know how to make him understand this is not a bad thing. Hopefully, this is going to become a safe place to go.

"You've got this," Neil says and Todd gets to his feet, clearly unsure. Neil watches him go and shakily introduce himself to the psychiatrist before they go through the door and presumably to her office.

Neil sits in the lobby the whole time, wanting Todd to have a familiar face when he comes back out; Neil brought a textbook but he can't seem to concentrate, all he can think about is Todd, and how he's doing on the other side of the door.

But an hour later the psychiatrist comes out, Todd next to her, and Neil feels relief floods his body. The color has returned to Todd's face, and although he's fidgeting nervously with his hands, Todd is talking to her. Neil can't hear what he's saying, and even if Neil could he wouldn't listen, but he's glad to see the tension in Todd's shoulders has lessened.

The psychiatrist says something and motions in Neil's direction. Todd looks back at Neil and nods to whatever she asked and then seems to wish her goodbye because then he's heading in Neil's direction.

“Hey,” Neil says, offering a smile, a silent question, a wordless *are you okay?*

“Hi.”

“How was it?”

Todd smiles and Neil feels his heart soften. “Good. Better than expected.”

“That’s great,” Neil grins.

“I already set up my next appointment— so we can go.”

Neil takes his hand and they start back out into the cold January air.

“Were you guys talking about me just now?” Neil teases.

Todd blushes slightly and at first, Neil can’t tell if it’s because of Neil’s question or because of the biting cold. “She uh— she asked if *the cute young man over there* was the boyfriend I had mentioned during my session. And I said— luckily.”

Neil can’t stop himself. He pauses in the middle of the fucking parking lot and kisses Todd.

“I’m so proud of you.”

Todd is blushing darker now. “You’ve already said that.”

“I know I have. But I want to keep saying it because I am and I’m so constantly amazed by you.”

“All I did was go to an appointment.”

Neil just shakes his head. “No, not just this… everything. I’m proud of you for everything.”

Todd has gone shy on Neil again and can’t quite meet Neil’s eyes, so Neil presses an abrupt kiss to his forehead and then walks him the rest of the way back to the car. Neil doesn’t ask about the appointment until they’re over halfway home after they’ve sat in the comfortable silence that Neil knows Todd likes when he’s thinking, listening to the noise of Neil’s shitty car heater as it finally lowers to a quiet hum.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you want to but— it went okay? And you’re going back?”

Todd looks over to Neil, presumably pulled from a train of thought. and nods. “Yeah, she was really nice. I was— I kept stuttering badly at the beginning and she was patient with me.”

Neil smiles what he hopes is his most encouraging smile as Todd goes on.

“She thinks I should see a therapist too but— I think I’m just going to start with this; she prescribed me a medication to try, so— I’ll need to pick that up at some point. And then I— I figure I can work from there.”

Neil nods. “Yeah. That sounds good.”

And Todd smiles back. Neil feels relief like a painkiller, and he takes one hand off the steering wheel to hold Todd’s, and they spend the rest of the car ride in their safe silence.

Neil is proud of Todd and he can feel that Todd is proud of him and it’s enough. They’ve always been enough.

Neil gets a job at the local movie theater a few days after Todd’s first psychiatry appointment. It’s time-consuming and some days can be terribly dull but really, in the long run, it's beyond worth it; Neil is finally completely independent. And, although that may be a nervewracking thing, it’s an empowering one too.

He’s on his lunch break, about a week into his job when the notification comes through.

That Dipshit Nuwanda has added **Toddy Boy <3** to **The Neil Perry Support Group**

Toddy Boy <3

What is this gc?

Neil Perry

CHARLIE YOU DIDN’T

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Oh yes I did ;)

Hello Todd! This is the gc Neil's

been simping for you in the past five months

Neil Perry

HE CAN READ OLD MESSAGES

NUWANDA WHAT THE FUCK

That Dipshit Nuwanda

todd can now see the extent of which he was

being ADORED

Toddy Boy < 3

haha what?

wait,,, is this gc seriously all about me?

Knoxious

Yes!! Neil was soooo whipped

Still is ;)

Neil Perry

I LITERALLY CAN'T WITH YOU GUYS

also knox you're whipped for Charlie so stfu

Knoxious

NEIL

That Dipshit Nuwanda

Yes he is;))))

anyway todd, enjoy reading your boyfriend pining

Neil Perry

i'm going to actually die

That Dipshit Nuwanda

WAIT

HAVE I SUCCEEDED

HAVE I FINALLY MADE THE FOREVER CONFIDENT

NEIL FUCKING PERRY EMBARSSED???

Neil Perry

NO

JUST,,, AHHHHHHH

You hath betrayed my trust

Knoxious

You can't see him but Charlie is HARDCORE

rolling his eyes at you right now

When Neil gets back to their dorm after work, Todd is reading a book for class. He looks up when he hears the door open and immediately offers Neil a smile and Neil grins back. Neil figures he should address the texts before anything else.

"So now that you've seen the group chat—"

Neil doesn’t get to finish his sentence because then Todd is on his feet and is pulling Neil down into a kiss.

"Hey there," Neil says into his lips, a little surprised.

“You’re— too— sweet,” Todd whispers between kisses.

Neil doesn't know exactly what to say because, although it may be sweet, the only reason he's ever said tender things about Todd has been because he loves him, and so “thank you” just doesn't seem to fit right as far as responses go.

So he just says the honest thing:

“It’s always been you.”

Because it has. Todd kisses him harder after that and Neil didn't really know it until that moment, but he wasn't quite sure until right now that Todd forgave him for the things his father said. And so he kisses his boyfriend back, and takes his hands, and says it again and again:

"It's always fucking been you."

There’s a box waiting in front of Todd and Neil’s dorm room when they get back from dinner on a late Saturday night near the end of January. *Neil Perry* is written in neat handwriting on the top that Neil can almost recognize, but not quite.

There’s no return address.

“Who’s it from?” Todd asks curiously, soft eyebrows raised.

“No clue.”

Neil picks it up and unlocks the dorm door with his free hand. He tosses his phone on his desk and goes to take a seat on his bed, box in his lap. Neil uses his car key to break the tape. He looks at Todd, who’s still standing and Neil motions for Todd to sit next to him before— very cautiously— opening the box.

On the top of the things in the box, there’s a small stack of papers and two envelopes with Neil’s name on them.

He starts with the envelope on the top; when he opens it, dozens of

photos fall out. Neil starts looking through them and there's a moment of confusion, followed by a long stretch of silence.

All the photos are ones he and the poets took over the years. Pictures from meetings and school and all the adventures they went on in high school. And then— the polaroids. The ones Neil and Todd took on Neil's 18th birthday.

The ones Neil's father was supposed to have thrown away. Neil just stares in awe at the photos in his hands.

Todd is just watching, looking just as surprised as Neil. "Who's it from?"

Neil doesn't even have to open the letter. He sets aside the second envelope, a slight fear of the words it may contain, and answers Todd's question as he starts to shift through the papers.

"It's from my mom."

He shuffles through playbills and assignments from senior year and all the things that matter that Neil thought his father trashed. "She must have— saved them when he wasn't paying attention. She *saved them* ."

Under the papers, one last item catches his eye: at first, all he sees is a flash of red, orange, and yellow. It takes a minute and just a bit of unfolding to place what it is.

A pride flag. *His* pride flag.

Some emotion grows, thick in Neil's chest. He takes the flag out of the box and flattens it in his lap.

Neil's mother was never too directly unsupportive, but she'd always been Thomas Perry's shadow. She always followed what Neil's father told her, and Neil remembers how uncomfortable she had looked after Neil came out; Neil has gotten angry in the past with her, but it's hard to be because he knows exactly what it's like to be trapped in the Perry household. He sometimes wishes she was as cold and distant as his father because he does worry about her, being forever under Thomas Perry's thumb.

Neil feels Todd put a comforting hand on his arm as he starts to open his mother's final envelope. When Neil gets the envelope open and a perfectly folded letter slides out, he quickly looks to Todd, a silent *I'm almost afraid of what I might read* .

“We’ve got this,” Todd whispers and Neil is so fucking glad they’re a ‘we’ now. He and Todd have gotten through the past year and a half together and will survive many more of them.

Neil unfolds it, and after a split moment of hesitation, starts to read.

Neil,

Your father had thrown these away but they seemed important, so I saved what I could. I know you’re not coming back home any time soon and as much as I’ll miss you, dear, I think that’s probably best. People like you and your father don’t mix well.

I don’t quite understand the gay thing or everything else that you’ve always been, but I hope you find people who make you comfortable. I know your father has never made you feel that way and I know he is a difficult man but just remember, he does love you. That being said; I think you’ll be safer if you do spend at least some time at a distance. I hope a day comes that you and your father can find some sort of peace with each other; but I know he’s been hard on you.

Just remember, despite how angry your father is and what things he may have told you, just know you are still my son. Nothing will change that, dear.

Much love,

Mom

It’s a bittersweet goodbye. Neil knew, in the long run, his mother would choose his father, but it still hurts. And yet? In his mom’s own, small, loving Neil way, this is her silent act of defiance against his father.

And for that Neil is so, so grateful.

Neil caves into Todd a bit then, and Todd holds Neil as he cries. Todd doesn’t ask why, he understands without so much as a word exchanged, and Neil loves him.

They have a Poets meeting in early February, and this time Neil, Todd, Knox, Charlie, and Cameron road trip down to Massachusetts to see Pitts and Meeks.

It was a bad idea. Or well, a bad idea for the sake of Neil's fragile sanity; Charlie and Cameron have been arguing for the better part of an hour.

"Cameron I swear to fucking god, if you touch me again, I will bite off your fingers like *carrots* ."

"I literally didn't do anything!"

Knox groans from where he's stuck between the two of them; he looks like he's wishing for a nice little smiting from God. "Jesus Christ, it's seriously like driving with five-year-olds in the car."

Neil and Todd both laugh, but then Charlie reaches across Knox to hit Cameron on the side of the head and all hell breaks loose in the backseat. Because he's driving, Neil isn't sure entirely what's going on but both Charlie and Cameron are batting at each other and seriously, they're not even halfway to Massachusetts. Eventually, Knox pries them apart and at the next gas station, Neil looks apologetically at Todd as he suggests: "Okay Charlie, how about you sit in the passenger seat for a while."

Todd just smiles and leans over to press a kiss to Neil's cheek before switching places with Charlie; Neil wants to say the ride is more peaceful after that, but it's really not. Although Cameron and Charlie are fighting less, having both Neil and Charlie in charge of the radio makes the car ride anything but quiet; Neil and Charlie turn up the music to an obnoxious decibel and end up shouting the lyrics to "Sweet Caroline". When Cameron starts to complain that this is *not* what he signed up for, Charlie just makes his *BA BA BUH* that much louder.

Neil catches Todd's eyes in the rearview mirror halfway through a series of Taylor Swift songs that Cameron greatly detests. Todd is smiling at Neil in a soft way that makes Neil feel like he's made of light and he grins back.

Eventually, they finally make it to Harvard, the five of them having to wander a bit before finding Meeks' dorms; he and Pitts, although not originally rooming together when the school year began, have since

switched into the same room. They find the right one after a while, only disturbing about half of the dorm on their way up.

This meeting is a proper poetry one, and Neil opens the meeting like usual but it's Knox who reads first.

Neil watches how enchanted Todd looks by language, and Neil swears every time Todd shows his love for poetry, Neil just becomes softer for him. After Neil reads a poem he brought, he goes to sit down next to Todd who immediately leans his head on Neil's shoulder. The poetry makes Neil feel understood and passionate, and he pulls Todd into a side hug, and they stay like that for a long time, Neil's arm wrapped around him. Around Todd. His boyfriend.

Neil starts attending therapy regularly again.

He talks about his father a lot more than he expects himself to; it's strange, with his poets in the past it's always felt like he's burdening them with his problems, but since Christmas, he's been trying not to hide behind this confident actor facade he's built for himself. And so, in therapy, Neil finally talks about all the things he kept in the dark all those years. He's never honestly told anyone everything that went on behind closed doors when Neil was young. Nobody knows about the time Neil told his father that he made Neil anxious after his mother told him to just be honest about how his father made him feel, and how his father's grip tightened on the steering wheel, knuckles white, as he told Neil he could give Neil "something to be anxious about." Nobody knew about the true times his father made Neil feel afraid.

But now someone did.

Neil let the truth spill out in his therapist's office and told Todd about some of the things he'd never admitted a few weeks later. Todd had stayed beside him, curled up in a blanket together in Neil's bed, and kissed every square inch of Neil's skin until Neil felt safe from the memories again.

But, overall, it helps. The sessions make Neil feel lighter where these burdens previously weighed down his chest. He puts it well in one session in late February:

"For the first time in eighteen years— I feel like I can breathe."

Because he can. When he hangs out with Charlie, or holds the Poets meetings, or has a slow day at work where he thinks too much, or when he goes to the bookstore with Todd, there is so much more oxygen in every room. He can breathe now; there is life after the worst of days.

In the spring, Neil finally gets his chance to get back on stage and all the poets come out to see him, grins wide and clapping loud. He missed the high of being on the stage, under the bright lights; there's nothing quite like it.

Afterward, he sees his boys. Todd brings him roses and he tries not to get choked up over it because it's a small act of affection but it means the world coming from Todd. Since it's another night until closing night (Both Todd and Charlie come to multiple of his performances, even though it's the same play), the poets take him out for dinner and Neil revels in his friendships.

Meeks and Pitts talk all about their most recent project. Charlie and Cameron keep arguing; even if they are at more of a truce these days, that doesn't mean the teasing and arguing have ended. Knox keeps rolling his eyes at his boyfriend but leans over to kiss Charlie on the cheek anyway. That always makes Charlie smile widely. Todd sits next to him, hand in Neil's; he may stay quiet but he laughs at the jokes and grins the whole time, and as long as he's happy, if silence is where Todd is comfortable today, then let him be quiet. Some days are just like that for Todd.

When they get back to the dorm and Neil shuts the door behind them, Todd can't stop spilling out his compliments for Neil's performance, and it makes Neil feel something invincible and electric.

"You're just—" Todd smiles, placing a kiss on Neil's jaw. "So brilliant. I don't know how you do it."

Neil kisses him and he will never get over how impressing Todd makes him feel. They're like that for a long time, just standing in the middle of their room, Neil kissing Todd and Todd's arms around Neil.

They don't have a vase, so later that night they have to cut the stems of the roses and put them in one of Todd's coffee mugs.

Neil knows the thought is cheesy as ever-loving fuck, but he swears to God he falls more and more in love with Todd every goddamn day.

Or maybe every day with Todd is just Neil re-falling in love. Either way, he absolutely adores him, and he falls in love with the way that things are so easy between them.

Every moment with Todd is a wonderful one, whether it's just getting dinner or sleeping together. He re-falls in love with the way Todd reads poetry; Todd leans into Neil and Neil reads snippets over his shoulder as Todd's lips silently form around the words. Neil loves the way Todd grins when Neil tells a joke, or the soft curve of his neck when he's concentrated on his homework, chin in palm. He falls in love over and over again with the planes of Todd's face and the way his thumb taps against Neil's palm or wrist when they hold hands when Todd is nervous and needs something to keep him steady. Neil adores the way Todd talks passionately about writing and poets and old authors that Neil isn't sure he would care about if the words weren't coming from Todd's lips. He loves the things Todd writes. The softness and the glow of his words, always perfectly strung together, every word specifically chosen. How Todd is patient with Neil when he has bad days, how Todd runs his fingers through Neil's hair just because he feels like it.

He falls in tune with Todd's rhythm. Neil loves Todd Anderson more and more, every single day. On the good ones and the lousy ones.

It's the two of them against the world and Neil's pretty sure they're winning.

"You've got this."

"I have— *no* ideas," Todd is saying. They've been sitting on the floor of their room for the better part of the last hour, trying to come up with ideas. There's a local poetry contest Todd wants to participate in, but he's stuck in a pretty tough writer's block and they've only just recovered from hangovers from Neil's birthday event with the poets that took place two nights previously.

"Sweetheart, you always have ideas. Let's see." Neil grabs the small whiteboard they recently stole from Cameron's room after an intense Pictionary night with the rest of the poets. "Things you could write about."

As Neil says it, he writes that as a title across the top of the board.

Todd is quiet for a moment.

“Neil— you have *awful* handwriting.”

Neil feigns offense. “What did I ever do to you?”

Todd laughs. “Sorry, just surprised me. You always type things and I guess I just assumed— you seem like the type to have nice handwriting.”

Neil just shakes his head, still acting fake insulted, and turns back to the board.

“Sorry,” Todd says but he’s smiling, and he leans forward to press a kiss to Neil’s cheek.

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” Neil says, grinning. He’s teasing and they both know it, but Todd kisses Neil properly. He can feel Todd smiling against his mouth and it makes him feel something warm and blooming.

They get a little distracted for a while, but some time later they get back on track, and after another hour of brainstorming, Todd finally has some sort of inspiration.

Todd sits there, tucked into Neil’s side, and writes. They plan on seeing the other poets later that evening for another meeting, and Neil always gets so excited even though the meetings are something they’ve been holding for years now.

Neil is finally existing the way he was too scared to live before. He survived the worst of times, and now he’s here with his boyfriend, soon to see his best friends and he’s becoming the actor he always wanted to be. After all this, he’s safe. Neil is everything he never thought he could have, is everything he didn’t use to think he deserved.

But he does deserve it.

Because he’s alive.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for reading this fic! please remember to leave comments and kudos <3

[p.s. there may still be an epilogue coming on this fic ;)]

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

what happens after!

Chapter Notes

finally, an epilogue as promise!
this is kind of supposed to be a pt 2 for the last chapter, but as i didn't want to make the final chapter a billion words long and these moments take place months later, i thought it made the most sense to make an epilogue; it's also just kind of a series of scenes i felt like including. seriously, most of the house scene was just crack my brain came up with at 3am.
this is a little different than the past few chapters, but i really hope you enjoy.
i'm not sure when more additions to this series will be coming, but i promise cool fic stuff is in the works <3
thank you so so much for all your kind comments and thank you for sticking with me this long!
and finally, a thank you to my wonderful beta and friend, @aml13! she's been such an unbelievable help throughout this fic, and i owe her big time.
yours,
bug (auxctor)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I think we need to set down some ground rules,” Knox says decisively.

The five of them are sitting on the floor of the living room of their new house; Knox is sitting with Charlie's head in his lap and Neil is sitting across from them, leaning against their ugly couch, arm around Todd's shoulder. Cameron is sitting to their right side, looking especially grumpy after being on the receiving end of a Neil-and-Charlie engineered prank.

Because, of course, living together was Neil and Charlie’s idea.

“All these apartments are stupid expensive,” Neil had complained as he scrolled through the listings a month previously.

“Are you sure it’s not too soon for you and Todd to move in with each

other?" Cameron contributed unhelpfully.

First of all, Neil wasn't even talking about him and Todd, and second of all, Cameron can shut the hell up. "Charlie and I were going to get a place and Knox and Todd were going to room together in the dorms next year; we just thought that might be a safer bet."

"Yeah," Charlie agreed. He was supposed to be helping look for apartments but got bored about half an hour previously and had taken up crumbling up tiny pieces of paper and throwing them in Cameron's direction; honestly, Neil had to applaud Cameron on how well he's kept his chill. "I would like to live with Knoxious, though."

Neil made a loud *awwwe* and Charlie threw his phone at Neil but Neil managed to dodge it. That's when the idea hit Neil.

"Why don't we all just live together?"

Charlie raised his eyebrows. "You mean— me, Knox, you and Todd?"

Neil nodded. "And Cameron, if he wants to."

"Really?" Cameron looked up from his phone. "Wouldn't all of us living together be awfully crowded?"

"Let's rent a house. If we split the rent five ways, that would be totally doable."

Charlie's answer was quick and his smirky smile widened. "I'm in."

"Hmmmm—" Cameron looked unsure. "Aren't you guys worried about living with your boyfriends?"

" *No,* " Charlie said, throwing another paper ball at Cameron.

"We already live together," Neil said. "And even though Todd and I have only been dating for six months, we've been friends for almost two years and— I really can't imagine us breaking up. And worst comes to worst— Charlie and I could share a room and Knox and Todd could share one."

Cameron mulls this over for a long minute. "Okay. Sounds good— I'd be into living with you guys."

"We should probably inquire with The Boyfriends , " Neil said.

"Where are they, anyway?"

“I don’t know, it’s Knox and Todd— probably doing nerd things.”

Neil laughed and he felt his heart speed up; he was going to live with Todd. He supposed he already has lived with Todd for over a year now, but he knew it would be different if he and all the poets lived in their own house. Neil and Todd would have their own room and— something about it felt different. Something about it was *exciting* .

Presently, in the living room of their shitty house, the conversation continues.

“What are the rules, babe?” Charlie asks, and Neil doesn't think it's intentional but looking up at Knox just about the most loving look Neil has ever seen.

“Well—“ Knox says, “First things first; only Cameron, Todd, and I can buy new furniture for our house. That’s rule number one.”

"Unfair!" Charlie says immediately and Neil almost begins to protest too but he bursts out laughing instead.

They are still surrounded by assorted boxes and random pieces of shitty furniture, a good portion of which being courtesy of Neil and Charlie going on a late-night trip to Goodwill. There’s the horrendous red and green checkered armchair, a coffee table that is at least 12 different neon colors, a couch with pictures of horses printed on the fabric, and a lamp so ugly that it puts the leg lamp in *A Christmas Story* to shame.

And then there's Charlie's fish chair. It’s a wooden chair, painted in all different colors, but the back of the chair looks like a giant fish; it's the most horrific piece of furniture Neil has ever seen.

The story of the ugly Goodwill furniture and the fish chair goes back a few days previously; it had started with Charlie and Neil being assigned the seemingly simple task of buying a couch, which they had done; it’s just that they may have overdone it a bit. Cameron, Knox, and Todd had been out getting groceries and Neil and Charlie looked up as they heard the front door open.

Knox was the first person who walked through the door and upon seeing all the furniture in the living room, had proceeded to drop all the groceries he was carrying to the floor.

“Charlie, what the *fuck?”*

“What? What is it?” Cameron asked from somewhere behind him. When Knox didn’t budge from where he stood, frozen in his state of shock, Cameron walked around him. Cameron’s mouth fell open as he took in the scene before him.

“What the *hell is this* ?” he demanded.

“Welcome to our home!” Charlie greeted instead of answering the question directly, brandishing his arms dramatically.

“I give you guys *one job* ." Knox looked completely exasperated. “Is this our new furniture?”

“Yeah, of course, it is.” Neil flopped back on the ugly brown and white horse couch and kicked his feet up on their new coffee table. Right then Todd came in behind Cameron and Knox, and Neil watched a completely mortified look cross his face too.

“These—” Knox said. “Are *hideous* .”

“Oh come on, the furniture isn’t *that* bad,” Charlie scoffed.

“It looks like we’re hosting a fucking garage sale in here.” Knox started to walk around the couch to better inspect it. “Like, seriously; the couch, the coffee table, the— the *lamp*.”

There’s a long minute of silence as Knox starts to walk around, taking in one piece of furniture at a time as Cameron and Todd stand into the entryway, both just staring. Charlie and Neil share two quick, proud grins.

Knox takes one look at the fish chair. “And… *why* ?”

“It *spoke to me* ,” Charlie said, looking as deadly serious as Neil had ever seen him. Neil stifled his own laugh. “I have a connection with it.”

“What the hell is he smoking?” Cameron asked, looking horrified as he took in the blasphemy that was Charlie’s fish chair as well.

Charlie grinned. “I’m stone-cold sober, baby."

“Doubtful. Nobody likes something this horrendous sober.”

“Stop making fun of my chair!” Charlie shouted with indignation. "Also Neil helped buy the furniture too, I don’t see you guys ganging up on him!”

Neil grinned. “Yeah, the coffee table was all me.”

“You bought this thing with actual *money* ?” Knox walked around the coffee table, taking it in all its ugly majesty.

“Well, the fish chair we got for free.”

Neil swore all the color left Knox’s face. “Where did you get it?”

“We found it on the side of the road!” Charlie said proudly. “I was thinking we could put it in our room.”

Knox came to a halt. “I swear, if you put any of this shit in our room, I’m withholding sex for at *least* a year.”

Charlie just frowned.

“What are you punishing us for?” Knox asked Charlie when it was apparent he wasn’t getting a proper reply. “Because whatever the hell it is— what do I have to do to get you to get rid of this shit?”

“Aw, babe. Do you really think so lowly of me? I just really, *really* love the chair.”

“I think all the furniture has *character* ,” Neil contributed, nodding and feigning seriousness. He knew the things they bought were ugly, but they’re the kind of items that are so ugly you just have to have them.

Charlie nods his head along with Neil and then looks at the last member of the grocery store committee to walk through the door.

“Toddy, you seem a little speechless over there,” he commented, smirking a tiny bit at Todd— who looked at a complete loss for words as he kept looking back and forth between Neil and the absolute disgrace of a couch.

“How do you want me to react?”

Presently, Charlie lets out a huff.

“Knoxious, you’re so unsupportive… I was considering changing my major to interior design but seeing as you’re insulting my decorating abilities, I’m starting to have second thoughts.”

Knox just rolls his eyes. “I’m sorry, it’s non-negotiable. You and Neil *cannot* buy any more furniture.”

Knox scribbles down the rule next to the number 1 on a sheet of paper.

“What next?”

They all sit there for a moment, thinking and Cameron’s the next one to grumble out a suggestion. “ *No pranks* .”

“ *No* pranks?” Neil asks as Charlie complains, “Richard Cameron, you are the most boring person to ever exist.”

“We’re not just going to abolish *all pranks* ,” Neil adds.

Cameron doesn’t appear to be ready to give up the argument that quickly; he crosses his arms over his chest and says, “Let’s take a vote, majority rules.”

Inevitably, Cameron loses the vote one to four.

“This is a bad idea, isn’t it? This whole all five of us living together thing?” Cameron asks.

“No, it’s not,” Knox says. “And if you thought this was a bad idea you should have said something before we signed the goddamn lease.”

“I have a friend who just lives in a big house with eight other people… I’m sure five of us in one house will be fine,” Charlie says, the one reasonable thing he’s contributed all afternoon. He sits up to better join in the conversation and it’s apparent Knox mourns the loss of Charlie laying on his lap. He reaches out a hand to take Charlie’s and Charlie takes it without so much as looking in his direction, as though he already knew what Knox was planning on doing.

“I’m not worried about *all of us* ,” Knox replies. “I’m worried about you and Cameron living in the same general vicinity.”

“Come on, Knoxious, relax,” Charlie says, throwing his free arm around Cameron’s shoulder and dropping Knox’s hand momentarily to start messing up Cameron’s hair. “Cameron and I are best buds now.”

Contrary to what Charlie says, Cameron tries to bat Charlie’s hands away from his hair. “No, the fuck we’re not.”

“Okay— rule number two,” Knox says, clearly trying to get them back on track before a fight breaks out, taking Charlie’s hand again. “Everyone’s doing their own dishes.”

“How are we supposed to enforce these?” Charlie asks.

“If you don’t, I *will* make you sleep on the floor.”

“And if it’s not me who breaks the rule?”

Knox gives Charlie a *who the hell would break stupid rules like that other than you* look but adds, “Anyone who breaks any of these has to sleep on the kitchen floor.”

“I think that’s fair,” Neil laughs. Everyone agrees and Knox makes notes of the consequence in the margins of the list.

“Okay, what’s rule number three?”

Cameron takes the list to add the next one, clearly prepared with an idea. “I’m adding *no fucking in the bathroom.* We only have one bathroom and I will not be late to class because one of you is getting a blowjob in the shower.”

Neil laughs, Todd turns red, and Charlie looks majorly disappointed. Knox elbows Charlie.

“Where *else* am I supposed to get action, then?” Charlie half asks half whines.

“In a *bed?* ” Neil suggests. “Like literally any normal person *?”*

“The shower adds. . . *variety* ,” Charlie attempts to explain. “It—”

“Okay, okay, Charlie, please don’t finish that sentence,” Knox says.

“If you need variety have sex on the fish chair.” It’s Todd of all people who says it, quietly but loud enough so they all hear, and Charlie and Neil burst into laughter. Neil thinks the two of them are starting to rub off on Todd.

Knox looks like he’s about to throw up at the mere suggestion of it.

“Todd, I thought you were on my side—“ He starts helplessly.

Todd laughs in his unfiltered way as Charlie says, “Brilliant idea!

“You’re *enabling him* .” Knox glares at Todd crossly. Todd stifles a laugh that’s so soft Neil would almost call it a giggle, and it’s so goddamn cute Neil leans over and kisses Todd on the cheek. Todd turns so that Neil can kiss him on the lips and Neil gets distracted by

Todd as Knox starts to argue with Charlie about why having sex on the fish chair is not only weird but impractical.

“Uh, guys, weren’t we going to write more rules?” Cameron asks, tapping the list in front of Knox.

Neil pulls away from Todd but pulls Todd closer to him, further into his side, before speaking.

“Right,” Neil says. “The list.”

They go on for a while, adding random rules as they come to be. A few of Cameron’s rules get voted out.

“If you don’t want other people to eat your food, you need to label it,” Cameron suggests.

“Charlie’s still going to eat everybody’s food,” Knox says but he adds it anyway. They all sit in silence for a minute, trying to come up with more ideas.

Knox looks at Charlie. “Do you have any suggestions, Pookie?”

“Overstreet, the fuck did you just call me?” Charlie asks, turning to look at Knox.

Knox turns red in an instant. “Nothing.”

“Did you just call me *pookie* ?”

“I was trying it on— I take it back.”

“You can’t take it back! You called me *pookie* .”

“I take it back!” Knox says again but Charlie is laughing his ass off now, accompanied by laughs from the other poets.

“You big dork,” Charlie says affectionately when he stops laughing and then kisses Knox for a moment in a way graphic enough that Todd and Cameron look visibly awkward. Neil never feels awkward about this kind of thing, but he pokes Charlie’s leg with his foot to get them to cut it out. They pull apart.

Cameron frowns at Knox and Charlie and the over where Todd is cuddled into Neil’s side. “I wish I had known it was a bring your own boyfriend kind of arrangement.”

“Did you think the house would just— provide one for you?”

“Well, no but— a guy can dream. You all have boyfriends.” Cameron motions wildly at each set of boyfriends to really get across his point, but the way he does it just makes everyone laugh.

Charlie grins before he responds. “I’ll take you to a gay bar to meet boys."

"We're not old enough to drink,” Cameron points out.

"We would be in Europe!”

"Well we're not in Europe, are we?" Cameron says. "Plus I'm not sure *bar guys* are my type."

"Right, right— maybe if I want you to meet someone as interesting as you, we should go to a DMV. Or chat up some older gentleman at a retirement home bingo night."

This makes Cameron thump Charlie on the temple, and after a few moments of batting and catfighting, Todd and Knox break the two of them apart. Jesus Christ, they’re never going to get this list done, are they?

“You know what we should do?” Charlie says once he’s no longer trying to thump Cameron back and has leaned into Knox.

“What’s that?” Knox asks, and he pushes Charlie’s hair off his forehead to press a kiss there. It’s sweet and Charlie smiles, and Neil has never seen Charlie Dalton this fucking smitten with someone.

“We could start our own fraternity! Like the guys in *Old School* .”

“We are *not* starting our own fraternity.”

“Come on! It could be like Dead Poets Society 2.0.”

“Then we could actually start a cult,” Cameron says sarcastically.

“We totally could!” Charlie responds with genuine enthusiasm.

In the end, it takes a good two or three hours to make a comprehensive list of rules since they all tend to get off-topic, but in the end, they end up with a good sixteen and decide to call that good. It’s all so ridiculous, and the longer spent making rules, the harder Neil laughs. By the end, his ribs ache; he’s the one to post the rules on

the refrigerator. This is why he loves living with the poets.

“Okay, well, this has been fun,” Neil says once he’s returned to the living room. “But I need to go finish unpacking; I’ve gotten next to nothing done.”

“I’ll come with you,” Todd says quietly.

“Keep getting distracted?” Charlie asks and sends the least subtle wink ever. Neil watches Todd turn red; Neil chooses not to comment. Instead, he just laughs, gives Charlie a wink back just for the sole purpose of getting Todd to turn even redder, and then takes Todd by the hand to go back to their room.

Most of Neil’s time unpacking is spent helping Todd with his three big boxes full of books. He left two of them with his brother during this past year so he didn’t have to bring them to the dorm but he’s parents wouldn’t get rid of them, and he has so many it takes a good few hours for Neil and Todd to unload them onto the bookshelf in their room.

Todd keeps apologizing for how many books and notebooks he has, and Neil keeps shushing him.

They work with a comfortable silence between them, and every once in a while Neil will lean over to give a kiss or two because he just can’t help himself. He and Todd have now been together for over seven months, and Neil can say things are going pretty damn well.

He’s in love with Todd and Todd’s in love with him and Neil feels an unshakable kind of happy.

It’s a few days after the rulemaking session that Knox, Todd, and Cameron put an end to the furniture argument. Neil gets home from work to find most of their furniture on the curb, including Charlie’s fish chair; when Neil comes inside, he finds a new couch, coffee table, and lamp. The plaid armchair is nowhere to be seen.

“What’s all this?” Neil asks loudly, finally finding Cameron sitting at a new kitchen table, working on his laptop while Todd and Knox are making dinner. Even though his boyfriend probably betrayed him and was part of this getting-new-furniture-without-telling-Charlie-or-Neil plan, he gives Todd a quick kiss on the cheek and then leans against

the counter, waiting for an answer.

“Knox’s parents lent him some money to buy a— uh— how do I put this nicely. A couch that doesn’t burn your eyes to look at?”

Neil feigns offense. “Our couch was great.”

“It was— *something,* alright. And then they helped us get the— the kitchen table too. The rest of the stuff was from Jeffery— he’s moving into a smaller place with his girlfriend and asked if I wanted it.”

“Can we at least keep the coffee table?” Neil asks hopefully.

All three of them very pointedly do not answer his request.

Neil tries something else. “Does Charlie know yet?”

“No, he doesn’t. He’s going to be getting home in like an hour.”

Sure enough, an hour later, Charlie gets home and they all know it because they can hear the un-godly screech he makes as he walks up the drive and must notice all their Goodwill furniture outside.

“Why is all our furniture out on the side of the road?!” Charlie demands, coming through the front door and slamming it so hard Neil is surprised it doesn’t fall off the hinges. “Why—”

He stops for a moment, taking in the newer furniture in the room.

“Where is my chair? ” Charlie growls.

Cameron and Knox share a weary look and Todd stifles a small laugh that he then tries to cover up with a cough. Charlie narrows his eyes at all three of them.

“ *Where is my chair?!* ”

“It might still be out on the side of the road,” Cameron says and Charlie darts back outside before anyone can say anything else. A minute later he comes back, protectively holding the fish chair, looking distraught and completely betrayed at this turn of events.

“We can try to negotiate, but it’s no use,” Neil attempts to say to Charlie, but Charlie— ever the more stubborn one out of the two of them— doesn’t back down, and instead sends Knox a hard glare.

“ *I’ll* withhold sex for *two* years if you don’t let me keep it,” he

threatens darkly.

Knox frowns.

“See, babe, that threat just doesn’t work with you,” he says, trying not to laugh. “Because I know you’re going to cave in like a week. If not earlier.”

Charlie’s jaw drops. “Are you seriously slut-shaming me right now?”

“No, if I were slut-shaming you, you’d know it.”

“First of all, let’s not slut-shame anybody,” Neil intervenes, not liking how completely serious Knox is sounding at this moment. “Second of all, I think we’re getting off-topic.”

“Okay, okay, final proposal,” Charlie says. “Neil and I will let you get rid of everything else as long as he gets the coffee table and you spare my beautiful, glorious fish chair?”

“Or what?” Cameron asks. He’s still sitting at the kitchen table and he leans back in his chair to give Charlie a challenging look.

Charlie considers this for a long moment and then the mischievous smirk returns to his face.“Or things will slowly start disappearing from your room.”

“I actually hate you,” Cameron grumbles; his chair makes a loud noise as he sits forward and the chair falls back onto all four legs. He goes back to whatever he’s working on his laptop.

“So is that a deal?”

Knox sighs, sounding defeated. “It’s a deal.”

Charlie grins and practically skips to go put his fish chair back at the kitchen table.

“It’s just— so fucking ugly,” Knox says to Todd, not even trying to be quiet with his complaints. Todd laughs.

“It’s *one-of-a-kind* !” Charlie shouts from the kitchen.

“A chair can be both.”

Charlie comes back with a proud smile on his face and kisses Knox on the cheek; Knox tries to pretend that he’s annoyed, but he fails

horrendously and just ends up kissing Charlie on the lips.

“Come on guys, get a room,” Cameron says. Charlie and Knox both give him the middle finger, not breaking away from the kiss. It makes a distraught look come across Cameron’s face, as if it’s only now starting to dawn on him that he’s going to be living with both Charlie and Knox and be subject to their obnoxious make-out sessions from now on.

All the chaos just makes Neil laugh, because this is his home now.

Things between Neil and his boyfriend feel like they get better every day. Since Todd is his best friend too, Neil thought the two of them knew everything about each other that there is to know, but over the time they live together, Neil finds out new things about Todd.

He never knew that Todd takes his tea with both milk and sugar or even the fact that Todd writes best at a little past two am.

They’re constantly building soft moments between them, now that they live together.

Sometimes, when it gets late, Neil will read to Todd, whatever book Todd has most recently been pursuing. Neil props himself up on one elbow as he opens the book between them. Todd will read occasionally since he tends to find words easiest around Neil, but Neil does it more often because he prefers it, and Todd always says that Neil reads best. He is an actor, after all.

Neil reads and Todd listens, occasionally reaching over to push some hair out of Neil’s eyes or to trace his lips as he talks. Neil likes it when Todd finds little excuses for physical contact like that and he takes Todd’s hand so he can kiss Todd’s knuckles in between sentences. It’s one of those simple things that still makes Neil’s heart so fucking soft for Todd.

It started one July night when Todd was having trouble concentrating and Neil offered to read to him, and they’ve been doing it at least every other night since.

There are still some rough nights.

Neil wakes up and his breath is heavy. He blinks a few times, trying to remember where he is and then Todd is awake next to him.

“Neil, ‘re you okay?” Todd asks sleepily, reaching out in the dark to find Neil’s hand. He sits up as he does, wiping sleep from his own eyes.

“Yeah. Yeah,” Neil says and he rubs his eyes; his fingers come away wet.

“ *Love* ,” Todd says softly, taking one of Neil’s hands to whisper the question against it. “What happened?”

Neil shakes his head, trying to make sense of jumbled thoughts.

“I had a dream. I was back at my Dad’s house and he was yelling and I….” He’s losing the memory of it quickly, except for the vivid feeling of the pain, the perfect image of his father. “I don’t know, I can’t even remember it entirely. I was just *scared* .”

Todd squeezes his hand. They stay like that for a while, Neil trying to find himself again and Todd next to him, sweet and patient.

“I know it was just a dream but…” Neil trails off and yet, Todd still understands. There’s another silence that passes between them before Todd breaks it.

“Sorry,” Todd says. Neil feels his thumb wipe away a tear and an arm wrap around Neil’s waist. Neil puts his arm over Todd’s shoulder and they cave into each other.

“It’s not your fault,” Neil responds quietly.

“I-I know. ‘M just sorry.”

Todd runs his gentle fingertips over Neil’s palm and along his fingers and Neil finds comfort in Todd’s soft touch. Neil kisses Todd and holds him close and he tries to remember that this is another lifetime— his father can’t hurt him in this soft world Neil exists in now. This place where his friends are and where his boyfriend can be peacefully in love with him. A place where saying the word *home* is no longer sour, no longer a lie.

“You’re safe,” Todd whispers; he kisses Neil’s forehead and then his cheeks.

“Thank you,” Neil says and he means it with everything in him; Todd is all he’s ever needed.

Todd nods. The two of them curl up next to each other and Neil lets their legs tangle together as he wraps steady hands around Todd’s waist. Todd leans into him, head on his shoulder and whispers the confirmation of what Neil already knows.

“He can’t hurt you anymore. I-I promise.”

But even though there are still nights like that, the sadness of losing the place and the people he grew up with hits Neil less frequently every week. He’ll still wake up with the occasional nightmare, but then Todd will play with his hair and whisper his own sweet everythings until Neil can rest again.

It goes both ways; on the bad days, Neil is there for Todd, too. During the panic attacks, no matter the hour, Neil will hold Todd.

There were a lot more bad days in the beginning. Neil trying to handle working too much each week and the trauma his father had left behind. Todd is still trying to adjust to working with a psychiatrist and still facing many things he never coped with that happened with his own parents; it was a lot to handle for both of them, but things are finally softer.

Neil can finally make sense of the world again.

Having a new home certainly helps. There’s something about there being a place that Neil can come to rest, find safety and feel loved all in one space that is surprisingly healing for Neil.

Todd's mental health hasn't been perfect but Neil thinks he'll be okay; all Neil can really do is be there for him. They’re both a little broken but Neil is realizing that maybe that’s okay; they’re both healing, and that’s the part that matters. For every bad day, there are plenty more good ones.

Overall, things are good, and Neil's heart hasn't beat this steadily in a long time.

Every day living with the other poets (save Meeks and Pitts) is a chaotic one, but Neil loves it in all its insane glory.

Of course, living together doesn't quite end the Cameron and Charlie feud. Like one day in late September that Neil finds Cameron waiting outside of the bathroom door.

"What are you doing?" Neil asks.

Cameron lets out a groan. "Knox and Charlie have been in there for like *an hour* . I think they're fucking in the shower again; they're going to make me late for class."

Neil considers this for a moment, weighing their options."We truly didn't think enough about the one bathroom thing, did we?"

"Not well enough, no."

Neil knocks his fist on the door. "Nuwanda, hurry up and stop sucking your boyfriend's dick!"

It takes Charlie a moment to respond (about the amount of time it would take someone to get a dick out of their mouth, Neil thinks). "Yeah, we'll be out in a minute!"

"That's it," Cameron says, practically fuming. "I'm going to be late for class. I'm going in."

"Cameron, you probably don't—"

But Cameron's already pushing the bathroom door open.

Neil hears a scream come out of the bathroom, which is then followed by an even higher-pitched scream, and soon Cameron is running out of the bathroom, his face as red as his hair.

"I'm going to kill Charlie," he declares loudly. "Fuck the truce we have, I'm going to kill him."

Speak of the devil, Charlie comes running out of the bathroom not even a few seconds after Cameron invokes his name, a towel hastily wrapped around his waist and his hair plastered to his head.

"Cameron, what the fuck?" he demands, closing the bathroom door behind him.

"You guys have been in there forever!" Cameron says, "I'm going to be late for class."

"So you thought bursting in was the best solution?!" Charlie is

frowning heavily now. Neil notes distantly that they need to get a working lock for the bathroom door.

“Why the hell can’t you blow your boyfriend somewhere else?”

“Oh please, Cameron, I *wasn’t* blowing Knox in there,” Charlie scoffs. “You’re just making up shit because you’re out to get me.”

“Charlie, I *saw you* ,” Cameron crosses his arms. “There’s fucking *semen in your hair.* ”

Charlie reaches up to pat at his hair, sheepish and Neil rolls his eyes at the entire situation.

That’s just when Todd comes down the hallway, back from class, and stops at the commotion in the middle of the hall.

“What is happening?” Todd asks.

Charlie and Cameron are still arguing but Neil answers his question. “Knox and Charlie broke rule number three.”

Todd looks unsurprised. He just lets out a small scoffing laugh, presses a kiss to Neil’s cheek, and then goes to finish schoolwork in his— or, well his and Neil’s— bedroom.

It’s later that evening, long after Neil has settled the argument between Charlie and Cameron and managed to not have anyone kill anybody, that he walks into his and Todd’s room with a decision.

“I’m taking you out,” Neil says decidedly.

Todd looks up from whatever essay he’s been busily typing away at on his laptop, sitting on their bed. “What? Where?”

“To get coffee,” Neil says. Coffee isn’t anything special really, but Neil is always insisting he take Todd out on dates, claiming that staying at home is romantic enough, but Neil still likes to take Todd out on low anxiety days.

Todd smiles at him and Neil sits down next to him and leans over to kiss Todd’s cheek. Instead, Todd turns his head and catches Neil’s lips with his; Neil kisses him for a while, reveling in little moments like this between them. He loves how Todd’s hand feels against his jaw

and how his own arms fit so comfortably around Todd's waist; Neil gets distracted for a while, just pressing kisses to Todd's forehead and mouth and neck. It takes him a while to remember they were planning on going out at all.

"Go get a seat, I'll get your drink," Neil says once they get to the coffee shop; because by now he knows how Todd takes his tea, and besides if Todd comes to the counter he'll insist on paying and Neil prefers doing it when he can get away with it. Todd grins, and Neil knows it's because Todd is forever appreciative when he doesn't have to order for himself.

Neil brings Todd his drink and they talk about everything there is to talk about. Todd is planning on potentially signing up for his first poetry slam even though it makes the anxiety return. Neil reminds him he doesn't need to decide right away; he has all the time in the world.

They talk until the shop closes down and the barista has to ask them to leave, and they walk home, Neil holding Todd's hand. As they walk, their normal comforting silence lingers between them and honestly, it's constantly astonishing to Neil how soft these moments between them are; between Neil and this boy he loves.

Although daily life at the poets' house is wild, it's even more fun when Pitts and Meeks come to visit. In early October they have a poet's meeting, and Meeks and Pitts decide to stay at the house, and it's one of the best weekends of Neil's life.

It's a few minutes before the meeting, late on a Friday night, Meeks comes back from the kitchen, a mug of tea in hand. "Why the hell are there blankets on your kitchen floor?"

"Knox and Charlie broke house rules so they have to sleep there," Cameron answers, not looking up from his laptop.

Meeks laughs at this and settles on the arm of the chair Pitts is sitting in (a comfortable, light blue armchair that now replaces the plaid monstrosity that once sat there). Todd is curled into Neil's side where they sit on the couch, leafing through one of his books of poetry to try

and find something that Neil can read (since Todd still isn't the biggest fan of reading out loud, Neil lets him pick Neil's poems at some meetings).

Knox comes into the living room to sit on the floor, his own book in his hands.

"Where the hell is Charlie?"

Meeks opens his mouth, presumably to say something about how Charlie is *Knox's* boyfriend but as though on cue, Charlie comes bursting through the front door, which he seems to have kicked open with his foot because his arms are busy holding something shiny and familiar to his chest.

"I come bearing a gift!"

He makes his way to the living room and lets the item clunk down onto Neil's coffee table.

"Charlie, what the fuck is that?" Knox asks, clearly worried that Charlie is coming back from another goodwill trip.

"It's the God of the cave," Charlie explains, gesturing towards the shadeless lamp with an almost nostalgic looking smile.

Neil stares at the lamp in awe. He finds the corners of his mouth rising to make a smile that matches Charlie's; he picks it up carefully and inspects it. It's the same, odd and beat up, the way he had found it.

"How did you get it?" he asks. "I thought we left this back at Welton."

"We did. Guess who found it and kept it?"

"Keating really kept it?" Neil can't keep the surprise out of his own voice. He runs his finger over the porcelain and feels Todd resituate on the couch next to him to look at the horrendous lamp himself. Charlie flops onto the floor, and he grins at Knox, propping himself up on his elbows.

"Of course he did. He seems like the kind of person who holds onto weird sentimental crap."

"I just didn't know The God of The Cave counted as weird sentimental crap. I thought it was just a piece of shit lamp I found senior year in the school dumpster."

Knox raises his eyebrows curiously. “So keeping shitty furniture has always been a thing you guys do?”

Charlie has the nerve to look insulted at the question. “My fish chair is not shitty,” he defends for the millionth time. “Why do you always feel the need to *attack* my chair?”

“Because it’s horrific,” Knox says, “And I didn’t even mention the chair.”

“You didn’t need to; I could feel your judgment.”

Knox rolls his eyes with a laugh and leans down to press a kiss to Charlie’s cheek. Charlie stops arguing at that.

Neil inspects the lamp for a little bit longer before speaking. “I need to visit him again soon.”

“Yeah,” Charlie says. “He was asking about you all. I just gave him a brief update, I wasn’t there for long, only just for lunch but he seems to miss us all; I think his new students don’t fuck up the school like we did and I think he finds that disappointing.”

Neil laughs. “Well, then we really need to go back.”

“I need to introduce Knox to Captain at some point. And—fuck!” Charlie says, interrupting himself mid-sentence. “You need to tell him you and Todd are dating.”

Neil laughs but finally relaxes back into the couch, Todd next to him.“Why does Captain need to know?”

“Because we all know he’s been rooting for you two since senior year.”

“He *what* ? Did literally everyone know I was in love with Todd?”

All the poets nod. Neil laughs and honestly, he’s always worn his heart on his sleeve and he has no clue why he expected any different.

Charlie continues where he left off. “Captain was especially curious about Todd; we all know you were his favorite.”

Todd looks sheepish and shakes his head. “No— no. Neil was his favorite.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Neil says. “He just helped me through my daddy issues

and encouraged me to act; you were his favorite."

Todd just shakes his head so Neil keeps going.

"He loved you, Todd. He was all *Todd Anderson, the greatest poet of our time!* " Neil does his best Keating impression which makes every poet who knows him laugh. " *If only he had some more self-confidence.* "

Todd is turning red. "He said— no such thing."

"Might as well have," Meeks says, nodding seriously.

"Well, he said a lot of shit like that."

"Remember when he made you do that poem in front of the class?" Charlie asks, elbowing Todd in the side pointedly.

"I'd rather not."

"That was the first moment I thought I loved you," Neil says without thinking.

Todd freezes and the chatter among the rest of the poets falls silent. " Really?"

"Yeah," Neil's voice comes out softer and more vulnerable than he intends and he tries to ignore the fact that all the poets are watching the interaction between them. "Your writing was one of the first things I loved about you."

A small silence passes between them and then—

Todd kisses Neil; hard. Neil makes a little *oomph* of surprise.

It's not that Neil and Todd never kiss in front of the poets, they do. They have been as long as they've been together, but it's always Neil kissing Todd when they're in front of other people; Neil has asked Todd about it and Todd says he's truly okay being kissed in public, he just never has the nerves to initiate it.

But here, now; Todd kisses Neil, even with all the poets in the room. Neil kisses him back and Todd is so sweet that he feels his heart soften; Charlie makes an obnoxious *oooooh* -ing noise from across the room but is cut short, presumably at a look from Knox. But it doesn't matter; for a moment, it's just Todd and Neil.

When Todd pulls away, all the other poets have fallen back into other

conversations.

“Thank you,” Todd says quietly.

“For what?”

He just shakes his head and gives his little shy smile. He doesn’t say anything but they both understand, Todd’s silent words the same as Neil’s from months ago. *For loving me* .

Neil grins.

“I do need to see Captain, though,” he says to no one in particular. “It’s been too long and I’d love for him to see how well I’m doing.”

Todd gives Neil this sweet, encouraging smile. Neil takes his hand and kisses his knuckles; Neil takes a moment to say a small *I love you* to Todd and Todd squeezes his hand gently and kisses Neil, whispering it against his lips.

“I love you— so *damn* much.”

“Are we going to read some poetry, then?” Pitts finally asks and Neil breaks away from Todd, arm hooked comfortably around Todd’s waist

“Hell yes, we are,” Charlie says as Neil replies “Of course.”

Neil opens the meeting like usual and Cameron reads poetry first; even Charlie claps when he’s finished, despite the slight break in their truce.

That night they all read poetry in Neil’s new home and Neil loves everything about it. He’s forever in love with his friends and his boyfriend and his heart feels light at this new life he’s built for himself; he’s healing in all the places it hurts most.

And it’s remarkable.

Chapter End Notes

please remember to leave comments and kudos! sending love to you all <3

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